



## Embodying CSR Through Aligned Communication

*a case study from a small sustainable Danish bank*

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# **EMBODYING CSR THROUGH ALIGNED COMMUNICATION**

A CASE STUDY FROM A SMALL  
SUSTAINABLE DANISH BANK

**BY**  
**ELISABETH HOUE THOMSEN**

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED 2017



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK



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Elisabeth Houe Thomsen



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
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Dissertation submitted

*Shh ...*

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## CV

Elisabeth Houe Thomsen is a former corporate journalist who is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Culture and Global Studies at Aalborg University in Denmark. She studies CSR communication in the banking sector, and so far her work has been published in Cancino, R. and Holmgreen, L. (Eds.). 2014. *Stakeholders in Action*. Aalborg University Press, Aalborg.





# ENGLISH SUMMARY

Following the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, allegedly sparked by the misuse of subprime mortgages in the financial sector, it seemed quite tempting for a number of businesses in the financial sector – as well as other sectors – to resort to using CSR communication as a lever to improve a somewhat tarnished image and reputation clinging to the entire sector – regardless of whether the particular business was in fact to blame for contributing to the crisis. Amidst this tendency to use and sometimes misuse CSR communication, a few businesses stood out as they chose not to use this lever – one of them is the small Danish bank Merkur, which is the focus of this case study. As a sustainable bank lending money to business customers, which are committed to focus on sustainability, Merkur actively and deliberately chooses not to communicate CSR in the more conventional way through text and talk. However, it seems evident that this small bank is committed to CSR. So how does the bank communicate CSR – or in this particular case rather enact CSR through careful alignment? And may this case in any way be inspirational to other businesses in the sector and in other sectors?

This dissertation thus poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How may Merkur align CSR communication among stakeholders, when Merkur actively tries to avoid conventional CSR communication?

RQ2: How is CSR communicated or enacted in Merkur?

RQ3: How is alignment ensured – if at all possible?

Together these research questions should help answer the overall question:

How does Merkur manage to align communication and enact CSR without communicating the concept in the conventional sense?

This dissertation comprises a compilation of research articles each addressing various issues related to the overall questions. Three empirical studies address the research questions from the perspectives of disclosing how communication and enactment between three central stakeholder groups – management, employees and customers – take place.

Article 1, *Employee stakeholders' role in ensuring alignment between employee and organizational branding*, investigates, as the title suggests, how management may allow for alignment of organizational branding, particularly as management does not wish to explicitly communicate CSR in text and talk.

Article 2, *The Bank Refused – a case study of CSR enactment through subtle discursive negotiation of power*, focuses on how the meetings between employees and customers play out and renders examples of efforts on the part of employees trying to limit power differences, which has been established to be one of the ways in which the bank can enact CSR.

Article 3, *Corporate Social Responsibility in Deed and not in Word – the Social Practice of CSR in a Values Based Bank*, explores how management and customers interact at the annual general meeting. This can be considered a test of how successful alignment of communication has been, but also an opportunity for management to be face-to-face with customers.

Together, the three articles are meant to illustrate how CSR is interpreted and enacted from when it is conceptualized at management level till it is enacted through employees and received and responded to by customers.

The dissertation is a longitudinal single case study employing mainly primary, qualitative data made up of both an in-depth, semi-structured interview, a focus group interview, several internal meeting and finally sound recordings and emails from employee-customer interaction.

The contributions of the dissertation are to a limited extent theoretical, but mainly empirical. Theoretically, the dissertation contributes by emphasising the importance of the self-promoter's paradox particularly when approaching stakeholder segments in the banking sector who already have an interest in both CSR and sustainability – even suggesting that this might be relevant to many other sectors. Empirically, it becomes evident that behind rejecting self-promotion lies an attempt to change the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, which is characteristic of this sector. The interest in changing the discourse lies with all the stakeholder groups investigated.

# DANSK RESUME

Efter den finansielle krises start i 2008, som angiveligt blev udløst af misbrug af realkreditlån i den finansielle sektor, syntes det ret fristende for en række virksomheder i den finansielle sektor - såvel som andre sektorer - at ty til at bruge CSR-kommunikation som løftestang til at forbedre et noget plettet image og omdømme, der efterfølgende hang ved hele sektoren - uanset om den pågældende virksomhed faktisk var skyldig i at bidrage til krisen. Midt i denne tendens til at bruge og nogle gange misbruge CSR-kommunikation valgte enkelte virksomheder ikke at bruge denne løftestang - en af dem er den lille danske bank Merkur, som dette casestudie omhandler. Som en bæredygtig bank, der primært lever af at låne penge til erhvervskunder, der har engageret sig i at fokusere på bæredygtighed, vælger Merkur aktivt og bevidst ikke at kommunikere CSR i den mere konventionelle forstand gennem tekst og tale. Ikke desto mindre virker det indlysende, at denne lille bank går ind for CSR. Så hvordan kommunikerer – eller i dette tilfælde udlever - banken CSR? Og kan dette case studie på nogen måde være inspirerende for andre virksomheder i sektoren og i andre sektorer?

Denne afhandling stiller derfor følgende forskningsspørgsmål:

RQ1: Hvordan kan Merkur opnå overensstemmelse mellem forskellige stakeholders i CSR-kommunikation, når Merkur aktivt forsøger at undgå konventionel CSR-kommunikation?

RQ2: Hvordan kommunikeres eller udleveres CSR i Merkur?

RQ3: Hvordan sikres overensstemmelse – hvis det overhovedet er muligt?

Sammen skal disse forskningsspørgsmål hjælpe til at besvare det overordnede spørgsmål:

Hvordan formår Merkur at sikre overensstemmelse i CSR-kommunikationen og udleve CSR uden at kommunikere konceptet i traditionel forstand?

Denne afhandling består af en række forskningsartikler, som hver især behandler forskellige spørgsmål i forbindelse med de overordnede spørgsmål. Tre empiriske undersøgelser angriber forskningsspørgsmålene fra forskellige vinkler for at belyse, hvordan kommunikation og udleverelsen af CSR mellem tre centrale stakeholdergrupper - ledelse, medarbejdere og kunder - finder sted.

Artikel 1, *Medarbejder-stakeholders rolle i at sikre overensstemmelse mellem medarbejder- og organisatorisk branding*, undersøger, som titlen antyder, hvordan ledelsen kan facilitere overensstemmelse i kommunikationen af organisatorisk branding, især da ledelsen ikke ønsker eksplicit at kommunikere CSR i tekst og tale.

Artikel 2, *Banken nægtede – diskret magt-legitimering gennem diskurs*, sætter fokus på, hvordan møder mellem medarbejdere og kunder forløber og viser eksempler på, hvordan medarbejderne forsøger at begrænse de magtforskelle eller den magtubalance, som Merkur er nået frem til skal begrænses som en måde at udleve CSR.

Artikel 3, *CSR i gerning og ikke i ord - den sociale praksis med CSR i en værdibaseret bank*, udforsker, hvordan ledelse og kunder interagerer på den årlige generalforsamling. Dette kan betragtes som en test af, hvor vellykket tilpasningen af kommunikationen har været, men også en mulighed for ledelsen til at stå ansigt til ansigt med kunderne.

Tilsammen skal de tre artikler illustrere, hvordan CSR bliver fortolket og udlevet – fra konceptualisering på ledelsesniveau over modificering og vedtagelse hos medarbejderne og til modtagelse hos kunderne.

Afhandlingen er et diakront single-casestudie, som hovedsageligt anvender primære, kvalitative data bestående af både et dybdegående, semi-struktureret interview, et fokusgruppeinterview, flere interne møder og endelig lydoptagelser og e-mails fra medarbejder-kunde interaktion.

Bidragene fra afhandlingen er i begrænset omfang teoretiske, men først og fremmest empiriske. Teoretisk bidrager afhandlingen ved at understrege betydningen af selv-promoverings-paradokset – særligt når det drejer sig om de stakeholders i banksektoren, der allerede har en interesse i både CSR og bæredygtighed – men det kan måske også gælde for mange andre sektorer. Empirisk, bliver det tydeligt, at bag afvisningen af selvpromovering ligger et forsøg på at ændre den hegemoniske neoliberale diskurs, som er karakteristisk for denne sektor. Interessen for at ændre diskursen ligger hos alle de undersøgte stakeholder-grupper.

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS

AGM	Annual General Meeting
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MR	Member's Resources
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PDA	Positive Discourse Analysis



# 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION

## 1.1. INTRODUCTION

*Without awareness of their CSR initiatives, corporations may draw no reputational benefit from their CSR initiatives. However, too much effort to create awareness can have a boomerang effect as stakeholders become cynical and skeptical when there is excessive self-promotion about CSR initiatives. (Coombs & Holladay 2011: 111)*

The financial crisis starting in 2008, for which the financial sector was largely to blame (explained in chapter 2), also resulted in an interest in marketing or re-branding businesses which were suffering financially as a result of the crisis – e.g. Danske Bank and their 'New normal' campaign which was anything but successful and thus quickly discontinued. The entire banking sector or financial sector seemed to suffer from decisions made by businesses driven by or ascribing to the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, which in turn sees profit maximization as the main driver of any business – even those businesses or organisations within the sector that ascribed to a different discourse. One such example was the Danish bank Merkur. Unlike many other businesses, which attempted to use Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to market or rebrand themselves (Pomeroy and Dolnicar 2008) Merkur did not seem to try to use CSR communication as a lever to improve its reputation, even though it also suffered under new stricter rules applying to the entire sector regardless of previous behaviour. According to Coombs and Holladay's quote, businesses should try to strike the right balance in terms of communicating, but Danske Bank and Merkur seemed to represent dichotomies in that one promoted CSR efforts excessively and the other bank not at all.

Being a Merkur customer I was wondering why Merkur would not pick the low hanging fruit. Its business conduct represented the very essence of CSR, and yet there was not much CSR communication. If CSR was not communicated in the conventional sense, then how would customers and not least new customers know about it?

Most corporations put considerable effort into aligning communication efforts (Cornelissen 2014: 26) so as to be noticed and stand out. Here, Merkur is no exception, but how do various stakeholders go about aligning communication, or on agreeing to not use CSR communication as a lever?

CSR is still a relatively new concept (to be discussed in chapter 3) open to interpretation dependent on type of business, type of product, culture, historical development, etc. But traditionally Bowen (1953) has been credited for providing a

modern understanding of the term in his seminal book ‘Social Responsibility of the Businessman’, and more recently the Brundtland Report, ‘Our Common Future’, from 1987 lay the foundation for a new CSR era; since then there seem to have been a growing interest and a ditto body of literature on the subject. As the term CSR is open to interpretation, it is interesting to see how various businesses communicate their CSR effort. In the case at hand, I find it particularly interesting that a business that may have every reason to communicate CSR related efforts, still chooses to communicate very little.

### **1.1.1 THE AIM OF THE DISSERTATION**

The aim of this dissertation is to look into how Merkur manages to communicate CSR in action rather than just words – and actually manages to avoid using the well-known CSR concept. Based on the apparent choice to not communicate CSR in a conventional manner, Merkur faces another challenge, namely that of aligning stakeholders so as to speak with one voice. Some kind of CSR activity is present, but it seems to be enacted rather than communicated, and as most customers are still interested in ‘genuine social responsibility’ more so than CSR efforts applied as a marketing tool, it is relevant to look into ways of conveying CSR efforts to customers. It seems that a majority of customers may actually choose this bank over other banks because of the genuine CSR efforts and because Merkur seems to refrain from using CSR as a marketing lever. However, there are several types of customers, and some see no problem using CSR communication as a lever. As a consequence, Merkur need to communicate to different stakeholders – with one voice – in a genuine way that appeals to all, but also in a way that ensures that Merkur stays true to its own values and ideals.

In order to address these CSR communication issues the analysis part of this dissertation is divided into three articles each focusing on different dimensions of Merkur’s CSR communication in order to answer the overall question:

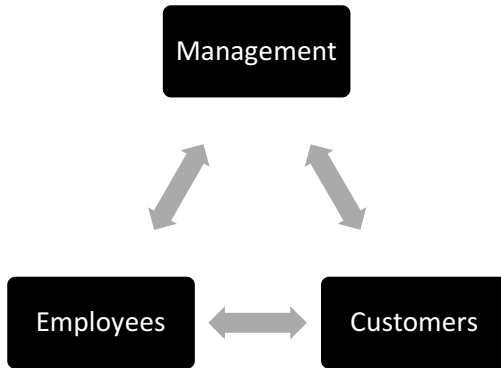
How does Merkur manage to align communication and enact CSR without communicating the concept in the conventional sense?

This has led to the following research questions:

RQ1: How may Merkur align CSR communication among stakeholders, when Merkur actively tries to avoid conventional CSR communication?

RQ2: How is CSR communicated or enacted in Merkur?

RQ3: How is alignment ensured – if at all possible?



*Fig. 1-1: Overview of stakeholders involved in communication*

The three articles each focuses on communication between different stakeholder groups.

Article 1 focuses on aligning communication of the Merkur brand between management and employees and poses the following questions:

1. How do the two stakeholder groups, management and employees, communicate the Merkur brand?
2. To which extent do the two stakeholder groups construe a coherent image of Merkur?
3. How do the stakeholders legitimate their claims?

In article 1, data comprises a semi-structured interview, a focus group interview and an online annual report. The semi-structured interview is with the communications officer, who has been asked to represent management as she is being interviewed about various choices that Merkur has made in relation to communication in general as a way of branding the business and communication about CSR specifically. The focus group interview is with employees concerning the same issues, and finally the annual report offers what may be considered a quite formal representation of Merkur. The purpose of including these three types of data is to identify whether or not Merkur manages to align communication through these various agents or actors.

Article 2 focuses on how CSR may be communicated or enacted in the meeting between the employees and customers. It poses the following research questions:

1. How do the employees negotiate a way of communicating CRS without using the concept?

2. How do the employees legitimize subtle power positions through discourse?

In article 2, some information on what Merkur communicates has already been transferred from article 1. It has thus been established that CSR is not communicated very much in text and talk, but rather more in action. In terms of data, it has thus become relevant to look at a way of communicating CSR via enactment. As the internal power structures are very flat employees help determine ways of conveying CSR through negotiation at internal meetings, which then represent one type of data. Communication with customers represents the other type of data – both a recorded meeting with a customer and email correspondence. By comparing these two types of data it becomes possible to look into how employees manage to implement the ideas on how to convey CSR, which have been negotiated at the internal meetings.

Article 3 focuses on communication between management and customers and poses the following questions:

1. How does Merkur management communicate with a range of stakeholders during its annual general meeting?
2. How does management negotiate the power dynamics of the annual general meeting, via discourse?
3. How do customers react to the attempt to tone down power communication – as reflected at the annual general meeting?

Inference from previous articles reflects on article 3, in which data from an annual general meeting illustrate the meeting between management and customer stakeholders. Several types of power struggles – or rather active attempts to avoid these – become apparent.

### **1.1.2 DISSERTATION STRUCTURE**

Following chapter 1, which provides a general overview of the dissertation, a case description is provided in chapter 2 followed by a brief CSR literature review in chapter 3. Chapter 4 comprises methodology, design and data. Chapters 5 and 6 describe CDA and legitimation theory respectively. Although, other theory is included, it has not been described in the theoretical section of the dissertation. An overview of the articles is provided in chapter 7. Chapter 8 bridges the articles, and finally chapter 9 offers concluding remarks

Lists of tables and figures, bibliography and appendices make up the remaining part of the dissertation. The three articles are included under appendices.

## **2. MERKUR – A DESCRIPTION OF THE BUSINESS AND THE SECTOR**

### **2.1. STRUCTURE OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter sets the stage for a case study of CSR communication within the banking sector. The banking sector as such will be briefly presented – including the challenges facing the sector in a Danish context following the early stages of the financial crisis in the wake of the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in September 2008, as this sparked quite a number of changes within the banking sector – also in a Danish context. In addition, it is relevant to briefly describe differences between types of banks as the sector as such has suffered regardless of business purpose; the sector is governed by the same rules whether the individual banks are commercial, social, ethical, coops, etc. A brief history of Merkur then follows – including an explanation as to why Merkur will be described as a sustainable bank in contrast to conventional (commercial) banks. Finally, my affiliation with Merkur – and the benefits and drawbacks of this affiliation will be briefly described.

### **2.2. BANKING SECTOR BEFORE AND AFTER 2008**

Up until September 2008, the world economy seemed in mint condition – at least in the Western countries. It was possible to borrow money quite easily and for almost any purpose. Anybody could just refinance any property they might own and thus have money to spend. The speculative housing bubble concerned most of the Western world. But then things changed almost overnight. The bubble burst, and it all started with the collapse of the American Lehman Brothers.

On 15 September 2008, Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy – the largest bankruptcy filing in history so far. At the time, Lehman was the fourth largest U.S. investment bank. Lehman Brothers' collapse was the single most important event contributing to the financial crisis that followed. The crisis was explained as a subprime crisis (Investopedia 2016).

The use of sub primes as it took place in the U.S. can be explained this way: To buy a house you get a mortgage loan from a broker, who then sells the mortgage to a bank, which in turn sells the mortgage but this time to an investment firm on Wall Street. The investment firms collect thousands of mortgages. Thus every month, there is an influx of thousands of mortgage checks, and this influx was supposed to continue for the life of the mortgages – and perpetually with new mortgages coming all the time. In turn, the firm sells shares of that income to investors who are willing to buy in the hope of making a profit. This seemed like the perfect solution, and in the beginning these seemed like safe investments – mortgages with big down payments, proven steady income and money in the bank. And there were many investors – both in the U.S. and in the rest of the world. And demands were high.

Everyone who qualified for a mortgage would get on – back in 2003. Without asking for e.g. proof of income, lenders were no longer interested in checking background information. Qualification guidelines became looser and looser. Banks did not care whether the loans were risky or whether the borrowers would ever pay them back, because they sold the mortgages to Wall Street, which then sold them on to global investors – as so-called low risk investment.

But, in contrast to the house prices, the household income did not increase. Thus, people could no longer afford the housing prices – and now it was only a matter of time before the problem came out. The housing bubble burst in the U.S. in 2006-7 as property values stopped increasing. Many people could not pay their very first mortgage payment.

“What happened was a chain of reactions very similar to those in the housing bubble but only in the opposite direction. The number of people who defaulted on their mortgages increased more and more which in return increased the number of houses on the market. The oversupply of houses and lack of buyers pushed the house prices down till they really plunged in late 2006 and early 2007.

That was the point when people on Wall Street started to panic. They no longer wanted to buy risky mortgages. Mortgage companies, which used to sell risky loans, experienced the devastating consequences of going out of business (Stock-market-investors 2016).

That in turn hit Lehman Brothers hard, and by September 2008 Lehman Brothers had to file for bankruptcy. Today, eight years after Lehman brothers collapsed setting off a huge worldwide financial crisis as such and in the banking sector in particular – with general mistrust in the sector as a consequence - regulators are still working on how to avoid similar crises occurring in the future. This has led to initiatives e.g. on the part of the IMF to improve credit ratings. (IMF 2010) Bank Transfer Day was another interesting initiative, which may be linked to the crisis in the sector and the general mistrust in the population in general. Bank Transfer Day started as a movement meeting on Facebook – and somewhat related to Occupy Wall Street<sup>1</sup>. The grassroots campaign started in 2011 with the aim to get people to shift out of big commercial banks for community bank or credit union or other more ethical banks. The first Bank Transfer Day was 5 November 2011, and by January 2012 Reuters reported that more than 60,000 U.S. customers had moved their money from large conventional banks to smaller more ethical banks. (Reuters, 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> **Occupy Wall Street** is a protest movement initiated on September 17, 2011, in New York City's Wall Street financial district. It has received global attention and has led to the Occupy movement against social and economic inequality worldwide.



Merkur also experienced a rapid influx of customers, but one can only speculate when it comes to determining the reason for this influx. Is it a result of the crisis that customers seek out other banks when looking for e.g. financing options? Or do customers change bank for ideological reasons? Of course there may be many other explanations, but it might also be that customers no longer trusted the conventional banks where profit-motives and scrupulous gearing of capital no longer seemed attractive.

### **2.3. NEW RULES GOVERNING THE SECTOR IN DENMARK**

The aim of this section of the chapter is not to provide a full description of the rules governing Danish banking, but merely to give a reference to these rules as they may be referred to in the analysis. So any particular rules referred to will be dealt with in context.

Denmark is part of the European Banking Union (Nationalbanken 2014) and thus governed by the rules that apply in the EU, and some of these rules are relevant to mention in relation to the onset of the financial crisis. Following the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, many other banks went bankrupt worldwide. In Denmark, the losses incurred by a number of banks, which managed to stay afloat, were covered by support packages implemented by the Danish government and financed by all the banks proportionately (Danske Bank 2017).

This praxis has stopped according to the Danish central bank, which stated that “As from 2016, the fundamental principle of crisis management in the EU will be that the owners and creditors of a failing institution must bear losses (Nationalbanken 2016: 42).

Also strengthened supervision by central state institutions has been gradually imposed in the wake of the crisis. In Denmark, the Danish Financial Supervisory Authority aims to govern the conduct of all banks by means of semi-unannounced visit. Usually, the Danish Financial Supervisory Authority is pleased with Merkur’s conduct. And each year, this supervisory authority publishes a rating of the Danish banks, so that customers can decide for themselves whether or not they wish to do business with a particular bank.

Although Merkur may not have engaged in risky behaviour, the same rules still govern all banks, and they have all been somewhat restricted in their freedom of action following the bankruptcies that started in the autumn of 2008.

The most practical implication for banks now is that following the crisis and the new stricter rules most banks have a surplus of savings deposits, and it is harder to send money into circulation – an example of this in a Danish context could be restrictions in banks’ ability to lend money to buy housing in rural areas.

## 2.4. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TYPES OF BANKS

For the purpose of this research project it is important to make a distinction between conventional/commercial banks (a coop can actually be a conventional bank) and the type of bank, which Merkur represents. Strictly speaking, Merkur would be correctly termed an ethical bank. The aims of ethical banking go beyond the traditional economic benefits to include social objectives. In most cases, traditional banks incorporate ethical and social aspects through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) thus adding value as suggested in the following quote by Perrini et al: ‘CSR contributes to value, and thus to a competitive advantage to the company’ (2006: 72).

Ethical banks are also characterized by a larger degree of transparency and rank high on the ethical scale in a recent study by San-Jose et al. This study uses a Radical Affinity Index (RAI), which considers transparency, placement of assets, guarantees and participation in decision-making (San-Jose et al. 2011). From a socio-economic perspective, Merkur is interested in investing in sustainable projects. Merkur describes its aim as twofold.

*First, to give and facilitate financial advice and financing to profit making enterprises within sustainable production and not-for-profit institutions and associations within cultural and social fields. Therefore, the main part of Merkur Cooperative Bank’s combined loans are in the environmental, social and cultural sectors. Second, to lend to and arrange mortgages for individual customers.*

(Merkur 2015)

Merkur still highlights the importance of making a profit, but a major distinction from conventional banks is that the profit does not have to be a large profit, whereas conventional/commercial banks would aim for profit maximisation. But a quick look at Merkur’s website also reveals that Merkur calls itself a coop, and technically speaking that is correct. Merkur might place itself somewhere between the terms ethical bank, sustainable bank, social bank and coop – for practical purposes I have chosen to go with the term ‘sustainable bank’ partly due to the definitions I have been able to locate in the literature, partly due to the fact that Merkur operates so much with the term sustainability in English and the equivalent ‘bæredygtighed’ in Danish.

Communication about type of bank is relevant within Merkur – and as is the case for any type of business, the management, employees and customers and other stakeholders, for that matter, are negotiating on an on-going basis how to form identity and image via text and talk. As Merkur has expanded rapidly and now has about 70 employees, it becomes increasingly important to reach a shared understanding of what Merkur stands for. Many of the employees come from the

banking sector, but often from conventional commercial banks. As Merkur does not pay the highest wages in the sector it may be safe to assume that a majority of the employees seek employment with Merkur because – at least to some extent - they share Merkur’s philosophy. This may be reflected in their interest in reaching a common understanding of how to communicate on behalf of the bank. And at the same time, Merkur faces the same constraints as the rest of the sector – e.g. stricter rules governing lending – so in that respect employees have to negotiate how to live this Merkur philosophy.

## 2.5. HISTORY OF MERKUR

Merkur is a sustainable bank – or as Merkur describes it – a cooperative bank and

*“... a Danish values based bank that combines classical banking with a vision of a **sustainable** (emphasis added) society. A classical bank means simple banking related to the real economy, funding through deposits and no speculative transactions. To us, a sustainable society means lending criteria that include environmental, social and ethical aspects in addition to financial considerations.”*

(Merkur, 2015)

Merkur was founded in 1982 in Hjørring (northern part of Jutland) as a small coop savings and loan association – inspired by the German GLS Gemeinschaftsbank. The initiative to open the bank was taken by the owners of a shop selling organic food. At the time, many conventional or commercial banks were not overly interested in lending money to projects of this type which they may have considered unsustainable from a purely financial perspective.

In 1985, the EU (or then the EEC – European Economic Community) harmonized banking legislation in Europe, so that cooperative banks and savings and loan associations ranked in the same category as other financial institutions and were thus subject to the same legislation. Merkur was formally recognized as a financial institution and merged with another small coop Fælleskassen Trion to form Merkur, Den Almennyttige Andelskasse (approximately: Merkur, The Non-profit Savings and Loan Association).

In 1993, Gaia Trust, which is a “... charitable association working for a sustainable and more spiritual future society through grants and proactive initiatives” (Gaia 2016) invested approx. DKK 4 million in Merkur for Merkur to market itself and become more visible in society. Otherwise, Merkur does not prioritise marketing as such. However, this marketing effort resulted in considerable growth and the opening of a new branch in Copenhagen, the Danish capital. Up until this time, the only branch was the one in Aalborg – the largest city in Northern Jutland – to which the original branch moved almost from the start.

In 1999, Merkur opened a new branch in Aarhus (second largest Danish city). Up until this time, Merkur only sold A shares, but now B shares were introduced. Contrary to A shares, B shares are transferable and can yield a return on investment. Also in 1999, Merkur's customer magazine Sociale Penge (Social Money) was renamed Pengevirke (approx. Money Activity meaning – what money can do for us).

The headquarters moved from Aalborg (fourth largest Danish city) to Copenhagen in 2004 as activities were increasing in that area. The branch in Aalborg remains. In 2005, in cooperation with a number of Danish NGOs Merkur developed an account to deal with sustainable world trade making it possible to grant credit to sustainable projects in developing countries where lending money sometimes proves more difficult or risky. Also this year, customer number 10,000 joined Merkur. Up until 2007, Merkur had had a small provisional office in Odense (third largest Danish city), which was turned now into a regular branch. In 2008, in cooperation with the Dutch bank Triodos, Merkur introduced a number of new ethical investment options for Danish customers. Without going further into detail just the names of the funds indicate their purpose – such as Triodos Sustainable Bond Fund, Triodos Sustainable Equity Fund, Triodos Sustainable Pioneer Fund, Triodos Microfinance Fund and Triodos Renewables Europe Fund.

In 2009, along with 10 other value based banks from all over the world, Merkur was the co-founder of a global network of banks with a value-based and societal oriented business profile: Global Alliance for Banking on Values. The network now has 25 member banks and spans all inhabited continents. Soon after, in 2010, Merkur and two similar Nordic banks Cultura Bank and Ekobanken were awarded the Nordic Council Nature and Environment Prize for their work with green capital management.

By 2012, Merkur reached 20,000 customers and 4,000 shareholders. Mybanker.dk, which measures customer satisfaction in Danish Banks, announced that Merkur had the most satisfied customers. In 2013, Merkur Hverdag (approx. Everyday) became an independent branch in Merkur Aalborg. As the name suggests this branch services smaller private customers with smaller tasks – over the phone. (Merkur Profile History, 2015)

### 3. CSR AND CSR COMMUNICATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE – LITERATURE REVIEW

Every new article mapping the field of CSR presents a new way of considering CSR – or at least a slight adjustment of already established ways of understanding CSR. And for every new article it is tempting to adopt these new perspectives and make them part of the current dissertation. However, the purpose of this specific chapter is to map the fields and relate CSR and CSR communication in practice and in theory to this dissertation – and to limit the scope somewhat and demonstrate an understanding of CSR relevant to this dissertation.

Rather than ignoring where CSR communication comes from prior to looking at its development, it is relevant to place it within the field of corporate communication. Corporate communication has been identified by Cornelissen (2011: 5) as “... a management function that is responsible for overseeing and coordinating the work done by communication practitioners in different specialist disciplines, such as media relations, public affairs and internal communication”. Evidently, more and more businesses highlight CSR activities on their websites – some with the purpose of benefitting from obvious ways to communicate with stakeholders (Clark 2000) thus also tapping into the potential of branding the business, others may be less fortunate in their branding efforts if their CSR communication efforts are merely cosmetic rather than real and strategic (Morsing & Schultz 2006; Porter & Kramer 2006). In fact, Jahdi & Ackikdili (2009) found that CSR marketing is often met with suspicion and cynicism. However, CSR may be communicated for a number of purposes such as inside-out communication, endorsement and stakeholder dialogue, management’s awareness of new communications channels, involvement of stakeholders, etc. as listed by Nielsen and Thomsen (2012). Regardless of the outcome of the increase in CSR communication, it can now be regarded a new sub field of corporate communication (Cornelissen 2011; Pollach et al. 2011). However, as Ihlen et al. (2011: 5) point out, CSR communication has not been the focus of research in its own right, thus giving all the more reason to the publication of “The Handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility” as the first handbook on CSR communication.

Furthermore, within the field of marketing communication Scandeliuss & Cohen (2016) offer an interesting perspective on the creation or rather co-creation of CSR communication suggesting that value should be co-created with stakeholders, thus benefitting not only the firms but also the network of co-creators as this co-creation leads to higher involvement and creativity and that it is therefore a valuable substitute to a more traditional and passive stakeholder response. Furthermore, active stakeholders are (according to Roos & Gustafsson 2011) more likely to remain loyal to the business. The value of co-creator perspective seems to be

confirmed by some of the data collected in this study. Co-creation may also offer a useful means to avoiding what Devin (2015) refers to as ‘Half-Truths’ in which CSR may be misused to provide self-laudatory statements attempting to sway public perception by hiding less positive information. These tactics could ultimately backfire and harm the credibility and trustworthiness of the business, as the less attractive truth might be revealed.

Much CSR research comprises ontological studies and normative CSR literature. But although quite a lot of stones have been turned, the field keeps evolving and yesterday’s normative recommendations become tomorrow’s truisms. This dissertation aims to uncover a quite simple set of questions: How does the organization communicate CSR? How do stakeholders – particularly management and employees – understand CSR and CSR communication? And as it would take more than a lifetime for one person to investigate this question, my focus has been narrowed down to just look at one organization – the Danish financial institution Merkur Andelskasse. Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2008: 299) have in fact said that an interesting research area would be

*“... to investigate a less detailed knowledge of banks’ CSR initiatives by simply asking whether consumers are aware of certain banks engaging in CSR. This approach would be in line with brand image studies where the perception matters, rather than the actual knowledge. The results of such a study may help us to shed more light on how consumers store CSR knowledge. Maybe they do so in a more diffuse way than the one investigated in the current study.”*

This particular research interest is closely related to this dissertation, albeit I will use the term “responsibility” as the key term when interviewing the two stakeholder groups related to this dissertation – namely management and employees. (Customers would also have been an interesting group to investigate in terms of CSR perception, but it is a much larger and much more diverse group and has thus mostly been left out of this dissertation.) These two groups may not consciously know or use the term CSR, and therefore they should not worry about defining this already very vague and volatile term. In fact, you might argue that once the term CSR becomes superfluous, the goal of implementing CSR thoroughly has been reached. In terms of reaching some common understanding of CSR, a discussion of social constructivism may prove useful. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, from a social constructivist theoretical position this dissertation aims to contribute new knowledge about the perception of CSR communication. The social constructivist perspective seems relevant because CSR is a fuzzy concept with no determinate definition. It is rather a construct undergoing constant change and repeated interpretation – in this case by management and employees in Merkur.

However, initially, a brief history of CSR is still a good place to start.

### 3.1. BRIEF HISTORY OF CSR AND CSR COMMUNICATION

When and how did CSR start? Or when did organizations become aware that what they were doing – when they were ‘doing good’ – was CSR or not CSR? In what follows, I shall try to render a brief and selective account of CSR history.

One of the cases most often quoted when exemplifying the first attempts at CSR is the case of Cadbury in England where the Cadbury brothers out of Quaker tradition took an interest in more than their organization’s profit. They are known for introducing progressive and more humane workplace practices. In 1879, when they moved a production facility from Birmingham to the countryside Bourneville, they created a ‘factory in a garden’ (Visser 2011: 99) and provided workers with facilities far exceeding standards of those times – such as a five-and-a-half day working week, pension scheme, time off on bank holidays, etc. And later on, they expanded this ‘project’ to include housing for workers and ‘works committees’ dealing with issues such as health, safety, education, etc. – similar to the works councils that are to be found in most larger Danish organizations now, but absolutely not common at the time.

Another example quoted quite often is the Carnegie example. In the 1890s, when Carnegie Steel was one of the world’s largest and most profitable industrial enterprises, Andrew Carnegie uttered the famous words: “*Man does not live by bread alone ...*” indicating that money is a means and not an end (Visser 2011: 61). In fact, some do claim that CSR has its roots in the writings of Andrew Carnegie on philanthropy when he stated the two principles that he believed were prerequisite for capitalism to work. First, the charity principle that more fortunate members of society should assist less fortunate members – including the unemployed, the disabled, the sick and the elderly – directly or indirectly. Secondly, he advocated the stewardship principle requiring that wealthy people and organizations act as stewards of their property – holding their money ‘in trust’ for the rest of society. Regardless of origins or start, researchers have tried to organize and map the field. Often various understandings of CSR are closely related to a certain focus or certain foci. In his book “The Age of Responsibility” Wayne Visser offers five such foci. He calls them ages and explains how certain ages have certain foci – here briefly explained chronologically.

### 3.2. CSR AGES

The ‘*age of philanthropy*’ starting in 1889 with Andrew Carnegie’s ‘*Gospel of Wealth*’ and peaking in 2006 when Warren Buffet donated a substantial sum to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The main idea is that with great wealth comes great responsibility (Visser, 2011, 50). However, this should not replace society’s responsibility towards people with no means to support themselves.

The '*age of marketing*' runs from 1965 to 2007 and is characterized by chemical, finance, food, tobacco and oil/gas industries welcoming CSR as a way to demonstrate that they are doing something good (Visser 2011: 74). This point of view almost depicts the marketing aspect and CSR as dichotomies. However, I still believe that the '*age of marketing*' has not ended as can be seen from e.g. a Danish example of a large commercial bank, Danske Bank, trying to launch a CSR campaign, but being heavily criticized for doing so (the campaign was called "New normal – New standards"). The negative reaction to the campaign can of course also support the ending of the '*age of marketing*' with customers reacting negatively to attempts at marketing good deeds.

The '*age of greed*' starting in 1972 'when the first derivatives<sup>2</sup> were traded to peak in 2008, when the sub-prime crisis caused a global economic meltdown' (Visser 2011: 24).

The '*age of management*' started in 1977, when the Global Sullivan Principles were launched and peaked in 2010 with the introduction of the ISO 26000 social responsibility standard. This age is characterized by alignment of CSR to business strategy and actually making a business case for CSR. Paradoxically, while CSR is considered to be voluntary this age is also characterized by the emergence of a number of standards that businesses can apply or join (Visser 2011: 96).

The '*age of responsibility*', and the basis for his notion CSR 2.0, starting in 1994 when Grameen Bank<sup>3</sup> emerged and e.g. Ray Anderson<sup>4</sup> from Interface argued that "Part of what needs to change is our focus on short term horizons" (Visser 2011: 138). These ages are overlapping, and most likely remnants from each age are present in our individual interpretations of CSR. The '*age of greed*' describes how some industries have been very keen on making money. And often this greed in especially the banking sector is attributed much of the responsibility for the economic meltdown or financial crisis that started in 2008 and is still not over (if at all it is going to be 'over' at any point).

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<sup>2</sup> A financial contract whose value is based on, or "derived" from, a traditional security (such as a stock or bond), an asset (such as a commodity), or a market index. ( <http://financial-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Derivative>)

<sup>3</sup> "Grameen Bank Secret Documents : Dr Yunus accused of diverting US\$ 100 Million aid" (<http://indiamicrofinance.com/grameen-bank-secret-documents-norway.html>) - in 2010 a documentary by journalist Tom Heineman showed how *some* microfinance institutions had overcharges in terms of interest rates and diverted money elsewhere – including Grameen Bank. Founder Yunus Grameen has since then resigned.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Anderson is the founder of the flooring business interface. Achieving mission zero™ interface's dedication to sustainability has evolved into the company's mission zero commitment — their promise to eliminate any negative impact interface has on the environment by 2020.



With this division into different ages, Wayne Visser tries to map the history of CSR – or the way CSR has been perceived over time. In line with the new notion of web 2.0, he offers a new definition of CSR as a CSR 2.0 version which focuses on long term solutions instead of short term solutions. In addition, he works with CSR principles and a matrix of change.

### **3.3. TYPES OF THEORY – INSTRUMENTAL, POLITICAL, INTEGRATIVE AND ETHICAL**

Another way of recapturing or defining CSR is the way presented by Garriga and Melé in their often cited article “Corporate Social Responsibility Theories: Mapping the Territory” from 2004 in which they – in their attempt to “map the territory” – divide CSR theories and related theories and approaches into four groups.

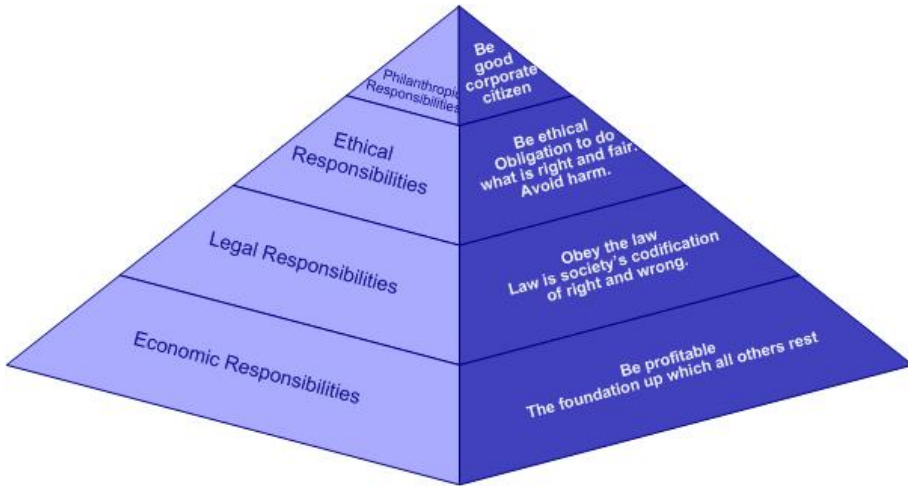
*‘Instrumental’* theories where the corporation is just an instrument for wealth creation and represented by the well-known quote by Milton Friedman: “The business of business ... is business”. In other words, corporations should worry about making a profit – and just that, because that way they can contribute the most to the well-being of the rest of society. In fact, quite a utilitarian view. *‘Political’* theories focus on how corporations can best and most responsibly use their power politically and thus contribute positively in terms of CSR development. *‘Integrative’* theories are theories in which the corporations attempt to satisfy social demands. Corporations rely on society for their growth, continuity and existence. Therefore, corporations ought to integrate social demand. Hence, the integrative approach. *‘Ethical’* theories is the final approach presented – and probably the most normative of the approaches. Both corporations and society hold embedded ethical values, and as a consequence, corporations ought to accept social responsibilities as an ethical obligation. In practice, Garriga and Melé (2004: 65) claim, most CSR theories represents these dimensions. And they suggest aiming for new theory integrating these four dimensions.

### **3.4. CARROLL’S CSR PYRAMID**

*Social responsibility can only become reality if more managers become moral instead of amoral or immoral.*

Carroll (1991)

Somewhat linked to these dimensions is Carroll’s CSR pyramid – which was actually not a pyramid initially. In his 1979 article on corporate social performance, Carroll already mentions economic, legal, ethical and discretionary responsibilities reflecting the history of businesses’ emphasis on various aspects over time. Although quite a few CSR models have been developed, it seems that both practitioners and theorists keep referring to Carroll’s CSR pyramid.



Carroll's CSR Pyramid

Fig. 3-1: Carroll's CSR Pyramid (1991)

Carroll's CSR pyramid has profit as the base upon which everything else rests. From profit as a driver, a motivational factor to enter into business there has been a shift to the more recent profit maximization ideal. Carroll states (1991: 41) that:

*All other business responsibilities are predicated upon the economic responsibility of the firm, because without it the others become moot considerations.*

The next step on the pyramid is legal requirements. Businesses are expected to comply with laws and regulations in society - and in terms of multinationals this gives rise to debate as some businesses try to get away with complying with the lowest standards when possible. Differences in legal standards are also included in Matten & Moon's (2008) account of why some cultures or rather nation cultures host more explicit businesses when it comes to communicating CSR. Even though the legal requirements are the next layer on the pyramid, this is primarily meant to show a historical development, in fact the legal step on the pyramid is

*...appropriately seen as coexisting with economic responsibilities as fundamental precepts of the free enterprise system.*  
(Carroll 1991: 41).

Ethical responsibilities are the next step – and are activities and practices that are expected or prohibited although not codified into law. In other words, they are

standards, norms or expectations related to what stakeholders consider as fair. In fact, Carroll sees changing ethics and values to be – in some cases – the driver for new laws and regulations, and in those instances ethics actually precede the legal responsibilities step.

*The business ethics movement of the past decade has firmly established an ethical responsibility as a legitimate CSR component. Though it is depicted as the next layer of the CSR pyramid, it must be constantly recognized that it is in dynamic interplay with the legal responsibility category. That is, it is constantly pushing the legal responsibility category to broaden or expand while at the same time placing ever higher expectations on businesspersons to operate at levels above that required by law.*

(Carroll 1991: 41).

The final step on this often quoted pyramid is philanthropy reflecting society's expectations that the business be a 'good corporate citizen'.

Whereas ethical responsibilities are expected of the business, philanthropic responsibilities or maybe more appropriate termed philanthropic actions are not. Public or stakeholder expectations are the distinguishing feature. Even if stakeholders like businesses to do good and act philanthropically in communities where they are involved, these shareholders do not perceive businesses to be unethical if they do not engage in philanthropy, thereby making philanthropy more voluntary. Thus some businesses believe that being a good citizen is enough.

*This distinction brings home the vital point that CSR includes philanthropic contributions but is not limited to them. In fact, it would be argued here that philanthropy is highly desired and prized but actually less important than the other three categories of social responsibility. In a sense, philanthropy is icing on the cake ...*

(Carroll 1991: 42)

Recently, Carroll (2004: 116) has attempted to incorporate the notion of stakeholders explaining that economic responsibility is to “do what is **required** by global capitalism”, legal responsibility holds that companies “do what is **required** by global stakeholders”, ethical responsibility means to “do what is **expected** by global stakeholders”, and philanthropic responsibility means to “do what is **desired** by global stakeholders” (Carroll's emphasis).

### 3.5. CSR AND CSR COMMUNICATION

Most often CSR communication is “communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts” (Morsing 2006: 171). The CSR

communication can be regarded as branding of the business as it appears in both the internal and external communications function. Often the CSR communication is meant to strengthen the positive perception of an organization.

There are myriads of CSR definition, and not one definition is agreed upon.

Likewise, CSR communication may be difficult to determine. And often it is up to the individual organization to define what CSR means to that particular organization and its stakeholders. The same seems to apply to a definition of CSR

communication, which is just as dynamic a concept as the CSR concept. However, a few attempts have been made at defining CSR communication. “Communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts” is one definition offered by Morsing & Schultz (2006: 171). This definition ties up with Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) transmission perspective on communication.

According to this understanding, communication is one-way – from the organization to the receivers (stakeholders). Communication is thus merely a question of informing or transmitting information. With the very easy access to two-way communication available today, particularly via new online media, this type of one-way communication seems quite old-fashioned.

Based on Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) characterization of models of public relations, Morsing and Schultz (2006) have developed a model of three types of stakeholder relations determined the way organizations strategically engage in CSR communication towards stakeholders. One-way communication from the organization to its stakeholders corresponds to the ‘stakeholder information strategy’, similar to Grunig and Hunt’s public information model (1984), and still in line with Shannon and Weaver’s ideas about communication. Communication is thus considered “telling, not listening” (Grunig & Hunt 1984: 23), mainly with the purpose of disseminating information, and not necessarily to persuade. However, the ‘stakeholder response strategy’ and the ‘stakeholder involvement strategy’ are based on a two-way communication model. Here communication goes both ways, to and from the public. The difference between the two models is that the response strategy may not be balanced as public relations are most often in favour of the organization. With the stakeholder involvement strategy, though, the organization strives at a dialogue with its stakeholders. Persuasion may still occur, but now it is not only initiated by the organization, but also from stakeholders. These latter two ways of communicating are more in line with Schramm’s (1954) interaction paradigm, which was also a reaction to Shannon and Weaver’s model.

Another way of categorising CSR communication is by these three approaches (Holliday, Schmidheiny and Watts 2002):

- „*Talk the talk*” – the organization talks about CSR or responsibility, but in reality does nothing. Windowdressing in other words.
- „*Walk the talk*” – the organization already engages in CSR, and does not just talk about it.

- „*Talk the walk*” – the organization primarily acts on CSR and then later communicates it.

In the case of Merkur, it can be discussed whether or not Merkur actually does communicate CSR, but in any case, 'talk the walk' is where Merkur seems to fit in. 'Talking the walk' without communicating has been defined (by Tóth 2007: 81) as "*Just Walk*". But even if the organization does not communicate CSR to its stakeholders, it may still let others talk about it, and this third party endorsement is considered more credible and successful (Morsing et al. 2008 and Pomering and Johnson 2009).

Yet another CSR communication approach is offered by Ligeti and Oravecz (2009) in which organizations focusing mainly on CSR activities are considered to have a 'quiet' CSR attitude. CSR efforts are valuable by themselves and need no advertising. Advertising may even cause resentment. The organization will then act without expecting anything in return, and this could be considered philanthropy using Carroll's pyramid. In addition, money may seem better spent on doing good than on telling about the good deeds. 'Loud' organizations, on the other hand, emphasize communicating or even better advertising their good deeds to raise awareness about the organization or the cause they are supporting. 'Quiet' and 'loud' may be seen as the two poles on a continuum, and most organizations are likely somewhere closer to the middle than to the poles. However, Merkur would be considered primarily a 'quiet' organization – deliberately applying non-communication when it comes to CSR.

The more 'quiet' organizations seem to rely on third party endorsement as described by Morsing, Schultz and Nielsen (2008). Organizations need to strike the right balance between too much and too little CSR communication. And here the employee stakeholder group can play a key role in building trustworthy communication of CSR to most stakeholder groups. Their model divides the communication process into processes 'expert CSR communication' and 'endorsed CSR communication' targeting different groups of stakeholders. Now even customers as a stakeholder group can play a role in communicating when they engage in the endorsed communication process telling potentially new customers about the organization. Thus the organization can stay 'quiet' yet still benefit from some branding of the business by others.

### **3.6. CSR, BRANDING AND STAKEHOLDERS**

Branding CSR towards various stakeholder groups may be in most organizations' interest. Some organizations, such as Merkur, may claim that CSR is the idea behind their business and that therefore branding CSR is unnecessary. But branding will take place intentionally or unintentionally towards various groups of stakeholders. Maybe a strong CSR brand will attract stakeholder groups such as new employees,

new customers or new investors. Hatch and Schultz (2003: 1043) defines this stakeholder involvement in terms of brand building as involving multiple stakeholder groups and recognizing gaps or interfaces between different dimensions of the corporate brands. So there is a relational nature to corporate branding. This could in turn lead back to Morsing and Schultz's (2006) stakeholder involvement strategy, which uses communication to negotiate with the public in order to reach a mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its public. Also Bhattacharya and Sen (2003: 78) focus on the consumer company relationship and focus on an important aspect applying to both employee and customer stakeholders: "[...] the large and perhaps increasing numbers of external communicators of identity (e.g., media, customers, monitoring groups, channel members) that are not entirely controlled by the company." These stakeholders also communicate an organization's identity and this communication is hardly controllable, and stakeholders communicate with other stakeholders thus making the negotiation of the brand a hermeneutic process with active stakeholder engagement (Gregory 2007: 63).

Freeman (1984: 52) originally defined stakeholders as "groups and individuals who can affect, or are affected by the achievement of an organization's mission". Stakeholder groups were initially described using a 'hub and spoke' model with the organization itself in the middle, but this more static model may not correspond to reality, where stakeholders from one stakeholder group may be represented in other groups as well. In the case of Merkur it could be an employee, who is also a customer, and who is part of an NGO. Crane and Ruebottom (2012: 77) explain how the "typical firm-generated economically oriented stakeholder role, such as investors, customers, employees, etc. [...] ignore[s] the social glue, the bonds of group cohesion, identity and difference that typically form the basis for claim-making in relation to the firm." In this model, generic stakeholder roles are cross-mapped with social identities such as e.g. 'political or issue based groups' and actually seem to reflect reality better.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Merkur has a fairly limited marketing/branding budget and relies on the employee stakeholder group for brand communication to and with existing and potential customers. And even customers play a vital role in communicating with potential customers as described by Gremler and Brown (1999). Gremler and Brown refer to this as 'the loyalty ripple effect', which is explained as the influence, direct and indirect, that customers have on a business in generating interest in the business by encouraging new customer patronage.

### **3.7. CSR DISCOURSE IN BANKING**

According to Ogrizek (2002) "finance brands have been clumsily managed", and should, like the consumer and service sectors, which lead the field at the time, communicate their *raison d'être* to opinion leaders and the general public. As

mentioned previously, after the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, which was largely sparked by the banking sector, some banks did indeed follow this recommendation. One example was a large Danish bank, Danske Bank, which introduced a campaign called “New normal” focusing mainly on conventional CSR issues such as environment, pollution, working conditions, etc. This campaign did not run for long, as it was most likely seen as false and just a way for the bank to rebrand itself and regain popularity. On the contrary, the campaign was considered to be harmful to the bank’s image (Jasper 2013).

Although CSR literature does not offer much insight into CSR in the banking sector, one study stands out. Perez and Bosque (2012) have gathered results from multiple case studies of banking service providers and analysed how CSR has helped define corporate identity. Quite interestingly they have found that although organizations increasingly include CSR in their strategies, some aspects of management such as CSR communication actually detract from their success. This may be a result of the entire sector suffering from the bad reputation clinging to banks after the onset of the financial crises in 2008. However, ‘... banking service providers refer to what the corporation does as another key element in their definition [of CSR], so organizational behavior is also part of their corporate identity’ (ibid: 156). Focus may have been on behaviour rather than communication after 2008, particularly in cases where there was a mismatch between behaviour and communication. These findings based on evidence from six large Spanish banks might have been interesting to Danske Bank prior to the launch of the unsuccessful campaign. Danske Bank had been criticised for their behaviour prior to launching a CSR campaign which might have been meant to better their image. Other CSR studies within the sector focus mainly on CSR initiatives rather than the communication of these.

### **3.8. POSITIONING THE DISSERTATION IN THE CSR FIELD**

Despite the increasing focus on the importance of CSR, not a lot of the literature available focuses on CSR communication in the banking sector or CSR discourse at micro level. Furthermore, there is no common understanding of CSR – let alone on how CSR and CSR discourse may influence stakeholders. Many studies seem to agree that CSR communication enhances brand awareness, reputation, employee branding, etc. However, excessive or inappropriate focus on CSR communication may increase brand awareness, but in a negative way. Some studies even find CSR communication hypocritical (Christensen et al. 2011) – and so does Merkur. As Merkur was founded on sustainability, CSR communication presents an inbuilt promotional dilemma, as most stakeholders are believed (by Merkur) to perceive CSR communication as self-promotion (Coombs and Holladay 2011).

Although customers may have chosen Merkur because of the CSR stance it takes, in general stakeholders are not aware of the sustainable actions of financial institutions, thus dialogue between stakeholders is much needed and should be considered a collective approach rather than a marketing tool (Hikkerova & Bortolotti 2014: 36).

Furthermore, CSR in banking is not much studied, but interestingly, a substantial Spanish study from 2014 (Pérez & Bosque) has shown that a large majority of banking customers – both savings and commercial – have very high CSR expectations (see also the findings of Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2008)).

The present dissertation tries to establish how this small bank – faced with the self-promoter's paradox<sup>5</sup> (Ashforth & Gibbs 1990) (which causes scepticism) – may interpret and communicate CSR at micro level.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the self-promoter's paradox communicating too much about CSR may cause consumers to question an organization's motives and create scepticism towards the organization (Ashforth & Gibbs 1990).



## 4. METHODOLOGY, DESIGN AND DATA

*“Our knowledge is anchored in time and space – and cannot be disconnected”*

(translated from Wenneberg 2010: 36)

### 4.1. THEORY OF SCIENCE IN RELATION TO IDENTIFYING CSR COMMUNICATION

This chapter serves to explain the theory of science relevant to this study – and also illustrates choices made in relation to collection of empirical data and application of theory. It is not the aim of the chapter to account in depth for different philosophical paradigms and how they have emerged over time. From positivism the philosophical trajectory has followed a path via critical reactions to positivism, acknowledging that we can never capture ‘true’ reality. Along this pathway, scholars have moved via critical rationalism and hermeneutics to social constructivism, post-structuralism, critical realism and phenomenology as these positions bear implications for how to work with theory, method and data (Collin & Køppe, 2014).

In the present project, it is important to understand various stakeholder groups’ perception of reality in order to disclose whether or not they are successful in communicating the way they desire. Social constructivism offers a good qualitative perspective. Berger and Luckmann take reality to be formed by all the social constructions that human beings are part of (2004: 27). This is also where social constructionism differs significantly from structuralism (e.g. Saussure and Chomsky), as structuralism discards the relevance of the subjective perception of reality (Collin & Køppe 2003: 200). In social constructivism, reality is a social construction (ibid: 39). This reality is constructed partly through the way we think about ourselves and others, partly through the way we talk about this reality. Thus language construes reality (ibid: 271). Although perception may seem entirely individualistic, it is nonetheless part of a collective understanding as well, as people are also social beings and part of larger communities and thus influenced by both individual and social perceptions. This interpersonal perspective helps construct individual perceptions of reality (Berger & Luckmann 1996: 132). In an organizational context it is therefore interesting to identify how various groups interpret and communicate business values, and also in this context language plays a crucial role in construing reality and implementing values.

As there is no commonly agreed understanding of CSR – and not just one true reality, but rather a very large number of understandings, the social constructivist theoretical approach is relevant as opposed to the positivist approach of e.g. natural science. The constructivist approach then also determines the focus on qualitative rather than quantitative data. In the focus on CSR communication, it is evident that the understanding of CSR is a construct undergoing constant change and repeated

interpretation. From a social constructivist theoretical position this study aims to contribute new knowledge about the perception of CSR communication.

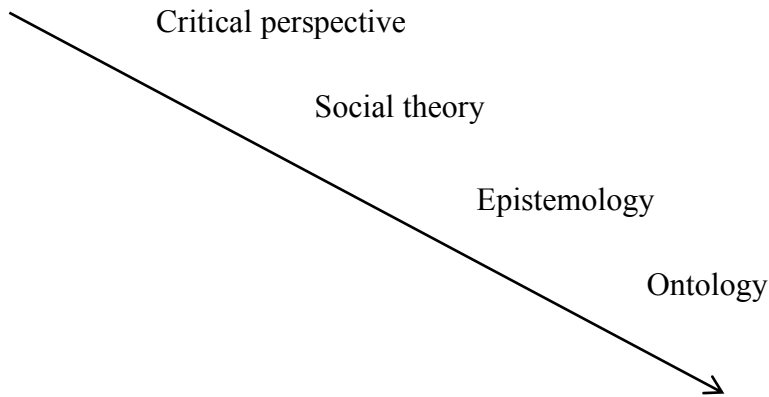
#### **4.1.1 WHY CONSTRUCTIVISM AND NOT CONSTRUCTIONISM**

Social constructionism originates in sociology and is most often associated with post-modern qualitative research. Social constructionists try to examine the nature of reality. Social constructivists are concerned with human awareness. The two terms seem to be sometimes used interchangeably and are often confused. Most often, the term ‘constructivism’ is used, and that alone could be an excuse for choosing this term. However, a more plausible reason is that from a constructivist perspective, individuals construe their understanding of the world or their world view through cognitive processes. In this project, it is most relevant to focus on cognitive processes in understanding CSR, and therefore using the term constructivist is more relevant.

#### **4.1.2 WENNEBERG’S FOUR LEVELS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Social constructivism is not just one approach, it is rather four ways of interpreting the same theory of science; not four opposing ways of defining social constructivism, but rather four degrees, steps or levels of social constructivism as explained by Søren Wenneberg (2010: 135). The levels are described as a ‘slope’ leading through all the four levels (illustrated below).

These levels gradually influence the way individuals perceive reality through the social processes comprising life. Initially, social constructivism offers a critical perspective. Rather than taking things for granted, we know that reality is constructed differently depending on our social context (Ibid: 19). The second level resembles sociological theory. The critical perspective described under the first level is applied on specific social phenomena. The purpose is not necessarily a critical one. Whereas level one offers a broad critical perspective on social phenomena, level two offers a more theoretical explanation of phenomena applying different theories on social reality (Ibid: 87). At the third level, social constructivism is described as epistemology or in other words the theory of knowledge. As social constructivism is applied to the theory of knowledge, social constructivism slides one step down and becomes epistemology. At this level, knowledge is examined to define it and to clarify how it is constructed through various social processes e.g. by means of language and culture. Thus social processes define our knowledge, our reality or our worldview (Wenneberg 2002: 97-102). The fourth level offers the most radical interpretation of social constructivism – namely the ontological position. From this rather extreme point of view, social constructivism comprises all parts of reality. From this position even physical objects are socially constructed (Wenneberg 2000: 115-125). Wenneberg depicts these four degrees of social constructionism as a kind of slope or inclined plane, where one might easily slide from the first rather straight forward position to a gradually more radical position in which reality is but social construction.



*Figure 4-1: Four levels of social constructivism – translated (Wenneberg 2010: 135)*

This study adheres to the social constructivist approach at the top of Wenneberg's slide or slope – a critical perspective as the study aims at exploring how stakeholders construe reality and how reality is represented. The ontological perspective is not included, and not relevant. However, the financial crisis is relevant from an ontological perspective, and quantitative data seem to support this, but in the present study the degree to which the crisis was in fact just a social construction has not been addressed. This question would be interesting to address individually, as the crisis might have been preventable, had the hegemonic discourse been different. The critical perspective is applied as ideas about communicating are being tested. Communicating CSR is by many organizations considered key to successful branding of the organization. However, doing CSR seems to be the most important way of communicating CSR in the case of Merkur. This case study may contradict this dominant view or trend of communicating CSR as much as possible. Finally, the epistemological perspective is relevant in that social processes are being investigated to better understand a given reality. To understand the social processes that influence individual perceptions of Merkur's CSR communication, it is necessary to analyse the individual experiences with this communication. Social reality is created in social processes such as dialogue and culture. Therefore, these processes must be analysed in order to try to understand reality (Morgan & Smircich 1980: 497).

## 4.2. STRUCTURE, METHODOLOGY AND DELIMITATIONS

### 4.2.1 METHODOLOGY IN RELATION TO THEORY OF SCIENCE - HERMENEUTICS

As this study operates within the social constructivist paradigm, the methodology applied is also determined by the theory of science. As established above, the paradigm governs relevant methodological approach in relation to reaching the goal of answering the research questions. Although hermeneutics cannot be characterized as a method, the hermeneutical approach to interpretation is within the realms of social constructivism – and also the overall methodology applied in this project. Thus interpretation and understanding is central to how we perceive the world – how we shape our worldview. Likewise, in the present study, where a preunderstanding has brought about an interest in finding out why CSR is not clearly communicated in text and talk, when it is so obviously practised. Later on, moving along the hermeneutical spiral, it becomes clear that this conventional approach to communicating may not be the most obvious choice in this case. By way of influence from the hermeneutic approach, the researcher becomes aware of the relevance in how the actors studied construe reality and thus a relevant alternative way of communicating CSR – and branding the business this way, although very subtly.

People – including bank employees and customers – partake in various social relations in which speech and interaction does not provide just one possible interpretation, but may be interpreted in various ways (Højbjerg in Fuglsang & Olsen 2004: 310). Thus trying to explain a situation is dependent on investigating context as well as speech and interaction. Hermeneutics encompasses several subcategories. The four main categories within hermeneutics, moving from traditional over methodological to philosophical and finally critical, can be explained by some progression.

Regardless of subcategory, the hermeneutic circle forms the basis of hermeneutics. To understand text (or speech, interaction or situations) hermeneutically means that one's understanding of the text as a whole is established by reference to the parts and one's understanding of the individual parts by reference to the whole. This interdependent relation provides meaning and makes it possible to understand and interpret. This mutual dependency is perpetual. However, when some understanding is reached and not challenged further, the process may stop and it is then possible to provide an understanding or interpretation (ibid: 312).

Højbjerg (ibid: 324) subdivides hermeneutics into four categories. **Traditional** hermeneutics have a text internal focus searching for some kind of true meaning of a text (although one true meaning would be impossible in a social constructivist approach). The whole and the parts are found within sentence constructions and in the text itself as a grammatical and linguistic phenomenon. The **methodological**

approach broadens the perspective focusing not only on the text itself, but on the relation between text, sender and context. In relation to this project, the methodological approach would entail that e.g. in an interview with an employee from Merkur, it would be relevant to consider e.g. the mood, education, personality, etc. of the interviewee as well as the text itself as these contextual factor could influence the text (broadly understood), thus this understanding of context is necessary in terms of interpreting the text. The **philosophical** approach moves focus to the relation between text and interpreter, hence the introduction of a receiver perspective (ibid: 324). Finally, the **critical** perspective highlights that also interests, ideology and power relations may influence both discourse and possible interaction (ibid: 334). This critical perspective also relates somewhat to symmetrical/asymmetrical communication.<sup>6</sup>

The hermeneutical focus of this study is somewhere between the philosophical and the critical perspective (which corresponds well with the approach described using Wenneberg's model), but also considering the traditional and the methodological perspectives. Both texts, discourse, intended message, message perception, interests of sender and receiver as well as power relations between the two groups are important factors to consider.

Thus hermeneutical methodological considerations could be:

- Analysing textual material from Merkur may be considered a traditional perspective, but also methodological as the text in itself is not interesting without considering the context in which Merkur operates, e.g. the current financial crisis and strong criticism of the banking sector. Furthermore, the philosophical perspective is relevant, as even in the text there is evidence that the text has been carefully constructed with the intended receiver in mind. Also in the text itself the critical perspective becomes evident, as the text reflects concerns about the power relationship that traditionally exists between some stakeholder groups in the sector.
- The interview with a representative of Merkur may be considered part of a hermeneutic circle, the intended message may be perceived as the whole, and through efforts to understand world view of the interviewee the interviewer may try to interpret the world view of the interviewee (ibid: 313). Through repeated contact with the people and the material analysed the researcher's understanding of the subject under investigation alters slightly and becomes more refined. However, the presence of the researcher

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<sup>6</sup> The interaction between the organisation and a stakeholder or stakeholder groups such as e.g. employees or customers may be symmetrical or asymmetrical depending on e.g. power relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 23).

may also influence the outcome.

Based on these considerations revolving around hermeneutics the philosophical/critical perspectives seem most interesting as the study aims to uncover the relation between sender, intended message, receiver and perception. To best uncover these issues and in line with relevant research method, the qualitative interview is highlighted along with textual analysis and analysis of naturally occurring data from employee/customer interaction in Merkur.

#### **4.3. MY AFFILIATION WITH MERKUR AND DATA COLLECTION**

I have been a Merkur customer since 2004, when my spouse began working for Merkur, and in the capacity of his spouse I have had the good fortune to get to know a number of the employees – especially in the Aarhus branch – from more informal gatherings such as an almost yearly summer excursion. This has proven helpful in many ways, e.g. at the cultural meetings I have sensed that I have been able to just walk in, and say good morning and then be ‘the fly on the wall’. I have, of course, not participated actively in meetings, and I am aware that my presence alone and the awareness among employees about my research interests (although I avoided disclosing what I was specifically interested in) may colour the conversation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). (Another aspect of the researcher’s presence has also been described by Kvale: "The interview report is itself a social construction in which the author's choice of writing style and literary devices provide a specific view on the subjects' lived world." (Kvale 1996: 253)). But because the employees know me so well and feel safe knowing that I will not publish anything, which they have not had a chance to review, they seem to feel confident that I will not misuse their trust – and thus they seem to almost forget about my presence. In one case, one participant actually asked about my opinion, and I had to ask the participants to just ignore my presence.

My spouse’s affiliation with my study object has also influenced the way that I have approached Merkur. Without his knowledge I wrote the CEO, Lars Perhson, to ask permission to look into CSR related communication at various levels and over a longer period of time. Lars Pehrson and various other Merkur employees have been most accommodating and have granted me permission to go about the task as I pleased, knowing that I would let Merkur read any material prior to publishing. My spouse has been largely left out of the loop – participating only in one cultural meeting.

The data collection process has thus been largely uncomplicated. All meetings, but one, have been audio recorded and the transcribed. Only at the annual general meeting was I not allowed to record so as to not make any of the participants uncomfortable or nervous. Thus I had to apply my own very primitive version of

shorthand. This becomes quite evident in the transcript, as I have had to focus on the most important parts rather than render everything accurately.

My affiliation with and knowledge of Merkur initially also sparked my interest in the subject of CSR communication in banking. From this first-hand knowledge about the banking sector, I feel obliged to consider many of the contextual factors that may also influence my research, hence the prior explanation of the challenges that the sector faces – in Denmark at least.

#### 4.4. PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

As the dissertation has developed over almost six years (a part time dissertation) the initial research resulting in the first article has informed the next article, which then in turn has influenced the final article – so the process has been both sequential and iterative. Although the dissertation does not really apply mixed methods in the understanding that mixed methods must comprise both qualitative and quantitative data, a mixed methods model describes very well the process of conceptualizing, designing, gathering data, analysing and inferring new knowledge, namely that the iterative sequential design described by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) in which one stage informs the next. The figure is my adaptation of their model, and therefore there are only circular shape boxes indicating that this is qualitative research rather than quantitative, which would be reflected in square shape boxes.

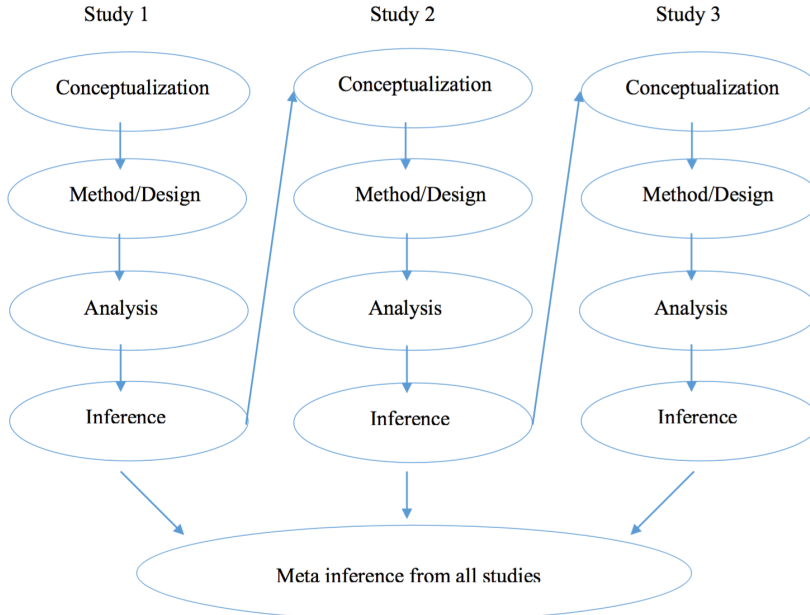


Fig. 4-2: *The iterative sequential design. Adaptation from Teddlie & Tashakkori (2009)*

## 4.5. DATA

Together the three articles comprise the data below, which was gathered over a period of three years. The data appears chronologically to some extent. However, as dictated by the sequential design and the hermeneutic process, more and more data influences the articles over time.

1. Interview with Communications Officer at Merkur Copenhagen headquarters – January 2012
2. Cultural Meeting: Transparency – video broadcast to all branches, directed from Aarhus branch – March 2012
3. Focus group interview, Aarhus branch – June 2012
4. Annual General Meeting – minutes/summary, Aarhus – April 2014
5. Cultural Meeting, Aarhus (local meeting): Equal Communication – November 2014
6. Cultural Meeting, Aarhus (local meeting): Delineation of Frontiers – January 2015
7. Customer correspondence by email
  - a. Ribers Kredit Information – a register of people with tarnished credit history – November 2014
  - b. The Motorcycle – getting a loan – March 2015
8. Customer meeting – face-to-face – spring 2015

All data have been transcribed and all sequences used have been translated communicatively into English (a list of translated quotes has been included in the appendices).

The best choice of convention in relation to this project has been determined by the theory applied which is both text and context oriented. But as Conversation Analysis has not been relevant, the very thorough transcription methodology presented by Gail Jefferson (1984) has not been relevant. The choice of convention is dependent on the type of interaction, the theoretical frame as well as the research question(s). In addition, the transcription process is open-ended, so the transcript may change slightly as the researcher gains more insight (Ehlich 1993). Recording have been played repeatedly so as to not miss any important detail. But conscious and even subconscious coding soon determines the degree of detail, leaving parts of the transcription very detailed and others reduced to a summary. The present transcripts include pauses and actual word order, but hardly any of the other information which would be very important in conversation analysis – such as gestures, intonation, pronunciation, overlapping, etc. The present transcription system works with indications of time, so that the reader as well as the researcher may quickly find the relevant passage in the recordings.



## 5. THEORY: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

### 5.1. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO CDA

As CDA as a methodological framework applies to all articles that make up this case study, it deserves more careful attention. Thus this chapter will explain the concept and reflect on its usefulness. When talking about Critical Discourse Analysis, there are major scholars that deserve mentioning – Norman Fairclough being the most prominent contemporary figure, but also Ruth Wodak and Teun van Dijk represent various ways of applying CDA. Before trying to determine what discourse analysis may comprise, it is relevant to take a look at the definitions of discourse offered by van Dijk, Wodak and Fairclough.

#### 5.1.1 UNDERSTANDING OF DISCOURSE AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Discourse is more than just the text or the clause. It is a stretch of language making up a coherent unit, usually or at least hopefully perceived as meaningful and purposeful and often representing some kind of social practice determined by social structures (relevant to the context). Van Dijk (1997: 1-5) seems to distinguish between discourse as it appears in everyday speech depending on context and a more theoretical approach in which he distinguishes between three dimensions – language use, interaction, and rendition of opinion. Applied to the current case study, the focus on language use might apply to the use of the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility at a local level (within Merkur) and a global level (the banking sector representing the larger context in which Merkur operates). Interaction might then be represented in the way Merkur interacts in relation to demonstrating its stance vis-a-vis the hegemonic political discourse – demonstrating its ideology. Finally, rendition of opinion is more closely related to social psychology studies and the focus on production of social knowledge, in other words focus is on rendering the intended meaning.

Fairclough's theory describes 'text' as any example of the use of language – written or spoken. To clarify, 'language' refers to verbal language, whereas 'discourse' should be understood in a broader sense in that language is just one element of social context, but closely connected to other elements (Fairclough 2003: 3). Fairclough distinguishes between on the one hand using the word 'discourse' to simply denote the noun as just the simple collective noun, which can cover any social practice governed by social conventions, and on the other hand as both socially constituted as well as constitutive (Fairclough 1992: 63; 2003: 123.) In this sense, 'discourse' then includes three dimensions – text, discursive practice and socio-cultural practice – as explained further below.

In relation to discourse in e.g. organizations Jaworski and Coupland provide the following definition of discourse as “... language use relative to social, political and cultural formations – it is language reflecting social order but also language shaping social order, and shaping individuals’ interaction with society” (1999: 3). This project uses the term ‘discourse’ in both these senses, i.e. in relation to particular spoken and written language occurring within a specific social field – banking in all its aspects, but also as political or philosophical ideology. However, discourse may also refer to the use of text, genre and orders of discourse. Hence, the use of text refers to any instance of using as little as just one word. Text used in specific situations – discussing loans with Merkur customers – with the aim of achieving a particular purpose may be defined as genre – e.g. a meeting with a financial advisor at the bank – and the term ‘orders of discourse’ refers to social practices, i.e. the social organization of both texts, genres and discourses (Fairclough 2003: 24) – moving from micro to macro level and *vice-versa*.

### 5.1.2 DISCOURSE AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

Discourse Analysis (DA) is a framework created for studying naturally occurring text and talk in the actual context. Early DA was merely linguistically focused on internal text structure, grammatical cohesion and semantic principles – all the micro-level elements that make up an understandable text (Fitch 2005: 253). Inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 1978), DA became important in sociolinguistics providing insight into the way both personal and social processes are encoded in language. Halliday introduced a three-layer model of analysis focusing on tenor, mode and field. Furthermore, he highlighted the interplay between context, interpersonal meaning, and social meaning.

“If we say that linguistic structure ‘reflects’ social structure, we are really assigning to language a role that is too passive [...] linguistic structure **is** [emphasis added] the realization of social structure, actively symbolizing it in a process of **mutual creativity** [emphasis added]. Because it stands as a metaphor for society, language has the property of not only transmitting the social order but also maintaining and potentially modifying it.” (Halliday 1978: 255)

Van Dijk’s (1997: 5) text analysis operates along the lines of three interdependent elements: Language use, communication and interaction. Similarly, Fairclough (1999: 180) applies a division into: description (text), interpretation (pragmatics) and explanation (the social and cultural context). Modern DA transcends disciplines and seems to focus equally on the linguistic elements at micro level and social practices at macro level.

From a classical communications perspective (Shannon and Weaver) communication is about conveying information one-way, but not all utterances – textual or verbal – are about just conveying information as context plays a crucial role in determining reception of various utterances, therefore this older

understanding of communication is too limited to include the discursive and social practices, which are so important in relation to understanding how CSR is conveyed when not explicitly communicating this in text and talk. In a more hermeneutic practise, the sender still produces the text and the receiver consumes and interprets the text, but the process is ongoing and can refer back to something historically – culturally, societally and ideologically – and thus it constitutes social identity and social relations (Jørgensen & Philips 2010: 73). In a social context, information is often conveyed implicitly as is seen in the analysis of Merkur's general annual meeting. Readers and listeners then make sense of the text, as their individual context determines the sense they make – sense which is not contained in the text as such. This context is explained by Fairclough (1989: 11) as Member's Resources comprising knowledge and expectations stored in our memory. He later on (2015: 155) describes MR as 'interpretive procedures' or 'background knowledge' activated by features of text also called 'cues'. The aim of this project is not to go into detail with DA, which does not have strict guidelines, it is rather considered a general methodology. The branch of DA called Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the focal point of this project. It combines linguistic analysis and ideological critique with the aim of uncovering relations of ideology and power, and it is most often applied when analysing political discourse. As with DA, CDA does not offer just one theoretical framework.

### 5.1.3 THE FIELD OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The main purpose of CDA is to map or identify the connection between language and social practice. Discourse analysis in itself, but without any context in the form of social practise will not provide the researcher with the necessary information about both discursive and non-discursive elements (Jørgensen and Philips 1999: 82). In the case of Merkur, non-discursive elements such as e.g. knowledge about rules and regulations governing the sector proved to be very relevant, although not part of the text being analysed. Context is so prominent in CDA along with a thorough theoretical framework combining theories from various fields such as micro-sociological theories and theories on power (Wodak & Cillia 2006: 708).

Data used for CDA should ideally be naturally occurring text and talk as it appears in its original setting. But as CDA applies a number of approaches to data collection rather than just one method, it is continuously growing methodologically adding new approaches. One of the most prominent CDA researchers, Teun van Dijk, combines CDA with cognitive psychology to find ideological structures unconsciously stored in people's memory (2001: 26). Ruth Wodak (1989: 137) analyses gender inequality as well as nations defining territory using language. Paul Chilton (2004: 197) applies a mix of cognitive and pragmatic aspects (such as Habermas' 'Validity Claims' and Grice's 'Cooperative Principle' theories) as he investigates the credibility of political texts. Finally, Fairclough's research interest is on social conflict and the ways in which the conflict plays out linguistically in various discourses of dominance, difference and resistance (Wodak & Meyer 2001: 22).

In terms of methodology, there is not just one way of collecting data. Some theorists do not explain their data collection, as they do not find it important, while others “rely strongly on traditions based outside the sociolinguistic field” (Wodak & Meyer 2001: 21). (In this projects, text data has been collected in steps over a period of about four years, while data in the form of non-discursive element has been collected even before the research interest took form and continued after the last texts were collected).

The following will focus on Norman Fairclough’s CDA model, which is a central model in the analysis.

### 5.1.3.1 Fairclough

Fairclough’s model is considered to be one of the most important models in the CDA field, arguably because he was the first CDA scholar to actually set up a theoretical framework providing research guidelines. In his model, language is a very important part of social life, and he describes what he calls dialectics and describes it as “relations between social practice (including discourse) and social structure” (Fairclough. 2015: 17). “Discourse and practice are both the products of structures and the producers of structures” (ibid: 17) and these structures may then be preserved or altered, and Fairclough demonstrates this in his focus on ideology and power in the examples presented. This dialectic relationship becomes evident through social events (texts), social practices (orders of discourse) and social structures (languages) (Fairclough 2003: 24).

‘Discourse’ describes the entire process of social interaction, depicted below, of which text is only a small part. In his three-dimensional analysis framework, Fairclough describes these three equally relevant elements. ‘Discourse-as-text’ is the first dimension depicted by the square at the centre of the model. Text covers any type of linguistic feature and any organisation of instances of text such as vocabulary, grammar, text structure and cohesion. (The present study focuses less on grammar and text structure and more on vocabulary and cohesion.) Moving on from the centre out to include the next square, ‘discourse-as-discursive-practice’ is now included. This dimension includes the situations in which text occurs – how is text produced, how is it circulated or distributed, and how is it consumed or understood. E.g. at Merkur’s internal cultural meetings, responsible behaviour may be discussed. In this instance, text is produced by the person chairing the meeting (based on her preunderstanding of the subject), it is then circulated or distributed during the meeting as it is being rendered and subsequently discussed. Finally, consumption and understanding is left to the individual participant (also based on their preunderstandings). At this level, intertextuality and interdiscursivity play important roles – e.g. in that the chairperson may draw on previous knowledge and other instances of discourse known to the participants (intertextuality) or refer to any discourse type known to the participants (interdiscursivity). Finally, the third square – the outer periphery – represents ‘discourse-as-social-practice’. This is where hegemonies become obvious as the analysis includes social conditions relevant to

both the production and interpretation of the text. E.g. in Merkur, there seems to be a common understanding of some resistance to the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse present in larger parts of the banking sector. Furthermore, the third dimension – discourse-as-social-practice – is the dimension from which Fairclough’s model can demonstrate both adherence and objection to hegemonies and maybe introduce new ideologies. In the present case study, Merkur wishes to promote an ideology, e.g. equal power distribution.

In addition to the three dimensions, Fairclough adds a methodological distinction, moving from ‘description’ at the centre over ‘interpretation’ to finally, at the outer circumference, include ‘explanation’. These distinctions relate to the researcher’s findings and not to the participants. ‘Description’ focuses on textual-linguistic features – but interpreted through the eyes of the researcher. ‘Interpretation’ focuses on how participants understand (or produce and interpret) text. “The interpretive phase [...] requires a degree of distancing between the researcher and the participant, but the interpretation is still done by means of categories and criteria provided by participants.” (Blommaert 2005: 30). At this stage, participant ideologies become clear, as participants reproduce bits of social ideology. One example of this is quite obvious in Merkur’s internal cultural meetings, where participants discuss approaches to ideology and how to reach some common understanding, which is important in representing the business to customers. The third dimension – ‘explanation’ – includes social theory in order to identify hegemonies. “Social theory creates the distance necessary to move from ‘non-critical’ to ‘critical’ discourse analysis.” (ibid: 30).

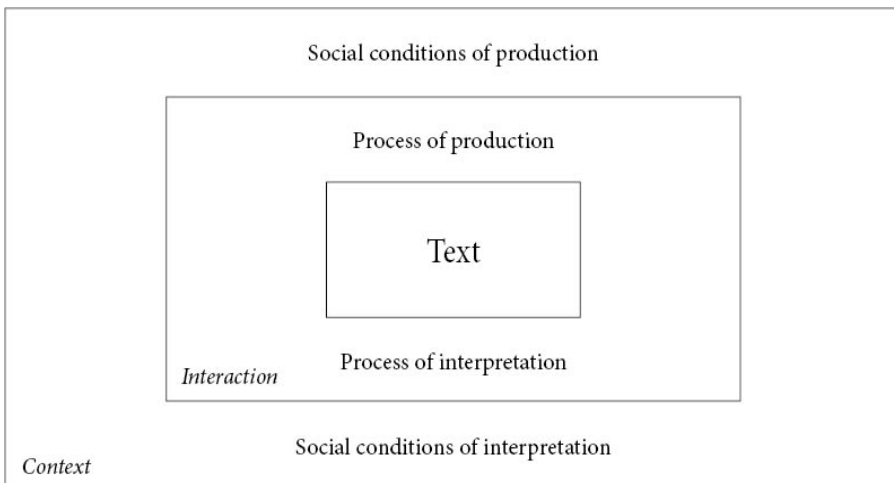


Figure 5-1: *Discourse as text, interaction and context (Fairclough 1989: 25)*

**Text stage**

According to Fairclough (2015: 59), “the nature of ‘analysis’ changes” from stage to stage. Starting from the centre focusing on the text or description, analysis mainly comprises ‘labelling’ formal textual features. But this may not be all straight forward as even in labelling the researcher is already interpreting the text as it is being transcribed. In interpreting, it is still an interpretation of “the cognitive processes of participants”, and in the final stage explanation looking into the relationship between interaction and more permanent social structures, the analyst’s own interpretation still focuses on some issues while at the same time escaping others.

**Text – the process of productions**

While text comprises elements such as grammar, vocabulary and structure, only the latter two will be described. Although I will be looking at text at micro level, grammar will be considered less important in relation to answering the overall research question. For this reason, I have also chosen not to go into detail with the formal features of text (Fairclough 2015: 130-131), which can be divided into experiential (knowledge and beliefs), relation (social relations) and expressive (social identities). However, the reader may be able to recognise these in the individual articles.

**Vocabulary**

As the researcher works at the lexical level, vocabulary is likely to reveal ideologies and hegemonies. As an example, for ideological reasons Merkur refuses to publicly refer to the concept of CSR, as they believe this concept is being watered down with a much frequent use or misuse for branding and marketing purposes. Likewise, it can be considered to be part of a hegemonic vocabulary, which has become even more dominant and even supplied with near synonyms (overlexicalisation or overwording (Fairclough 2015: 133)) in the wake of the financial crisis.

Intertextuality as “the occurrence and combination of part of concrete actual texts in the text” being analysed also constitutes vocabulary being analysed (Fairclough 2015: 38). E.g. in one of the articles, there are quite a few references to a Danish philosopher and his texts. The vocabulary used in connection with this example may appear to represent the ideology of a particular social group – in this case respect for the power we may or may not deliberately or unknowingly exert over other people – and the values of this group expressed positively or negatively (ibid: 164-166).

**Textual Structures and cohesion**

The connection between individual bits of text and context make up textual structures, which seem somewhat similar to genre. Likewise, cohesion describes how part of sentences are combined to make up larger textual structures. Smaller grammatical units help establish cohesion between text and context as well as presenting information in a particular order to enhance perception – e.g. repetition of words, use of near synonyms, etc. Lack of structure or cohesion or an unexpected structure may confuse the reader or participant, and Fairclough explains that

“particular elements can be interpreted in accordance with what is expected at the point where they occur” (Fairclough 1989: 138).

Banks all have to abide by certain rules, which are not necessarily known to the public. Therefore, customers may assume that a banks are greedy in wanting to charge for certain services, which they ought to provide out of the good of their hearts. (The example appears in the analysis in article 3.) The bank then has to explain through causality, as this information is vague. The next stage in Fairclough’s model, Interaction, looks into interpretation of meaning – also intentional or unintentional hidden meaning.

### Interaction – the process of interpretation

Interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction. At this stage, text is seen as a product of a production process and a resource for interpretation (understanding). Individual background knowledge and personal assumptions determine both production and interpretations of text. Interpretation takes place, when a person combines the text with his or her knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough 1989: 142).

The figure below introduces the concept of Member’s Resources as explained above (Fairclough 2015: 155) as ‘interpretive procedures’ or ‘background knowledge’ activated by ‘cues’, which are textual features.

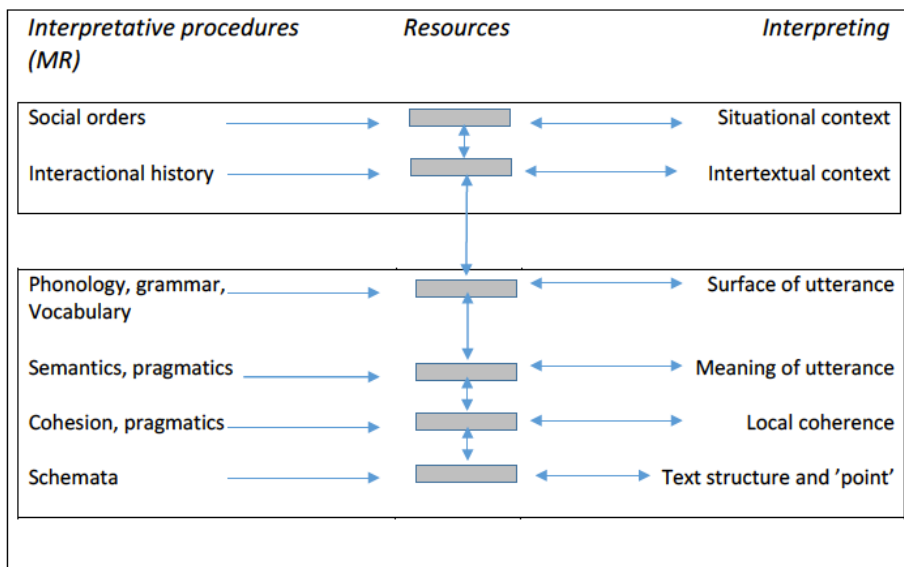


Figure 5-2: The process of interpretation

Figure 5-2 illustrates the process of interpretation – interpretation of context at the top and the four levels of interpretation of a text below (Fairclough, 2015: 156). This more detailed illustration is not rendered in the three articles and only serves to illustrate the level of detail of Fairclough’s CDA theory.

Interpretation starts at text level with the interpretation of parts such as words, phrases and sentences – surface of utterance. This interpretation is of course influenced by the individual MR, which will in turn determine how the individual elements combine to provide meaning in an utterance at the pragmatic level – meaning of utterance. Next, interpretation relates to connections between individual bits of text combining coherence and assumptions – local coherence. Finally, the last level relates to understanding the global coherence of the text – global as certain schemata help establish a common understanding of the overall text topic. The next step is the interpretation of context as illustrated in the top section of Figure 5-2 (and explained by the outer circumference of Figure 5-1).

### **Interpretation of context**

Van Dijk describes context as “the mentally represented structure of the properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or the comprehension of discourse” (2001: 356). However, context is again interpreted individually based the individual MR. In one of the articles, for instance, a participant at an annual general meeting is under the assumption that if an NPO wants to become a banking customer in a values based bank, it should not cost anything – her MR must centre around the virtues of philanthropic conduct, resulting in certain advantages, and an assumption that shared values must replace hard cash. However, the bank employee’s MR is centred around rules and regulation governing the sector. Thus the same situation is interpreted differently. Particularly the latter party is more focused on external cues such as rules and regulations. This could also be seen as intertextuality, as the interpretation of the text is based on the previous knowledge of similar discourses. Fairclough (2015: 159-160) lists four questions relevant to the process of interpreting situational context:

1. “What’s going on?” – subdivided into activity, topic and purpose
2. “Who is involved” – subdivided into activity type, situation type, social identities
3. “In what relations?” – subdivided into type of relationship (power, social distance, etc.)
4. “What’s the role of language?” – subdivided into genre and channel

Interpretation takes place at two stages, but still simultaneously. At one stage, the interpreter determines the institutional setting of the interaction based on the social order stored in the individual MR (e.g. at work in the bank). At the next stage, the situational setting is individually determined (e.g. meeting with a customer) based on the institutional social order determined at the first level.



### **Context – the social conditions of interpretation and explanation**

Finally, context or social reality will also influence individual interpretation of a situation. Thus the text (or in the case of this current study – primarily talk) does not stand alone, but must be understood in a particular social setting. Traditionally, focus had been mainly on the text itself, but with the inclusion of context. Text can no longer stand alone and cannot be understood in isolation. Discourse includes both text and context. At the explanatory stage, discourse may be considered to be part of a process of social struggle, class relations and power relations, and it is at this stage that discourses are influenced by and influence social structures, e.g. by either sustaining or changing them. The individual's MR will influence these social determinations and effects (Fairclough 1989: 163). However, explanations are dynamic and may change depending on new contextual information. Meyer (Wodak & Meyer 2001: 16) describes this as a hermeneutic process rather than analytical-deductive tradition (ibid: 25). Hermeneutics he understands as a way of grasping and producing meaning relations by understanding the meaning of one part in the context of the whole, but it requires explicit focus on the linguistic analysis of texts.

Summing up, Norman Fairclough's CDA framework includes three stages: Description, interpretation and explanation, and each stage has been described separately for the purpose of understanding. In reality, however, all three stages will take place simultaneously and blend in a social encounter. Based on their Member's Resources, people will interpret and produce texts; and people's individual resources (MRs) are influenced and determined by social as well as ideological structures. CDA's principle role is then to uncover power relations and maybe even change these socio-political practices that are reflected in our communication. In the individual articles, the terminology related to Fairclough's understanding of CDA has not been described as thoroughly as in this chapter, but is rather implied. The individual articles in the appendices all apply Fairclough's CDA framework, but focus less on grammar and more on context. However, the underlying understanding of the linguistic features relevant for the framework is important.

## **5.1.4 DISCOURSE AS SOCIAL PRACTICE**

CDA has been criticized for various reasons – both Fairclough's version and CDA in general. The more general critique pertains to both theory and method as well as the potential of CDA (Blommaert 2005: 31).

### **5.1.4.1 Issues related to theory and method**

Methodologically, even at the level of terminology, scholars are not in complete agreement as to what the individual terms signify. For that reason, it is relevant to specify which particular theory is being criticized. For example, Fairclough seems to be the only scholar operating with the term 'Member's Resources', however the meaning of that term may well overlap with similar terminology – even his own

‘interpretive procedures’. Henry Widdowson’s critique (2004) has been aimed primarily at Chouliarki and Fairclough, as he has claimed that as CDA relies on the use of fragments of text, scholars can ‘cherry-pick’ examples which they wish to highlight rather than include the entire text. This specific critique even expands to DA in general. Chilton (2005), even though he works with CDA, also criticises CDA as it is not based on a particular social programme, and therefore, non-experts can claim to be applying this framework. In fact, a predetermined social theory may also colour the way in which data is analysed. Ruth Breeze (2011: 513) states that there is an “observable trend” for CDA work “to operate in a top-down manner”, whereby adhering to a particular social theory is likely to influence the way data is selected rather than providing an “all-round, in-depth study” taking several dimensions into account. Also Slembrouck (2001: 40-41) finds it problematic that CDA does not adhere to a particular social theory. While Bluhm et al. (2000: 10-13) find this less problematic so long as the analyst reveals his or her own perspectives in order for the reader to take this more subjective position into account. Hammersley (1997: 237-248) may be one of the strongest critics of CDA pertaining to methodology. Besides believing that CDA is philosophically unclear, he claims that it lacks adequate social theory. Even at word level, he says the ‘critical’ is “an abandonment of any restraint on evaluation of the texts and contexts that are studied” (243). Verschueren (2001: 60) claims that often CDA is just used to support an agenda, and he says the early CDA was “subjecting the media, as well as other institution, to a circus trial, playing fast and loose with the observable facts in order **to support preconceived claims** [emphasis added]”.

In relation to the interpretation of findings when applying CDA – again Widdowson sees the analyst as merely transmitting a “view of meaning, whereby significance is always and only the reflex of linguistic signification” (1998: 142). This critique may represent the majority critique of the field. Widdowson (1998: 136) has also pointed to Kress’ critique (1996: 25) in which he states:

“this set of semiotic features, of representational resources, suggests and implies, and I would wish to say, over the longer period produces a particular disposition, a particular habitus, and in so doing, plays its part in **the production of a certain kind of subjectivity** [emphasis added]”

Further, in Fairclough’s CDA model his interpretation of the dialectic relationship between discursive and social practice has been criticized, as it may be difficult to actually separate the two. His model may make the distinction so as to make it easier for the researcher to apply various steps of the model. However, the distinction may be unnecessary, if it renders no distinction in what is analysed. Jørgensen & Philips (1999: 101-102) criticize this dialectical relationship as it is difficult to distinguish between the two precisely because of this dialectical relationship. Where does one stop and the other begin? This blurry line between the two seemed a bit blurry in my analysis too.

#### 5.1.4.2 Issues related to the potential of CDA

Methodological and theoretical criticism reflects on the usefulness and potential of CDA. Blommaert (2005: 34- 37) divides the potential or lack of potential into three categories. The first claim is that CDA is linguistically biased – particularly Fairclough’s framework with its inherent lack of attention to linguistic detail. Related to this criticism is the “emphasis on *available* discourse”. Blommaert says (34) that there “is no way in which we can linguistically investigate discourses that are absent”. I tend to disagree in this particular case, as Merkur is actively trying to avoid the use of specific terminology. For that reason, it becomes highly relevant to look at what is not being said, and how certain beliefs may be represented with these restrictions being ever present. Blommaert’s second position relates to the relevance in parts of society that have not undergone close CDA analysis. CDA deals mainly with First World (36) problems and may not be directly applicable in relation to third world problems. An interesting observation which I have not had the chance to investigate yet. The third problem, relates to a particular timeframe being studied. CDA is still quite young and has not yet proved historical relevance to a large extent.

#### 5.1.4.3 CDA replacements?

Just after the turn of the millennium in 2004, James R. (Jim) Martin advocated a change in focus from critical (understood as negative) to positive when analysing discourse. In his 2004 article: “Positive Discourse Analysis: Solidarity and Change”, he writes:

“What concerns me most in arguing for constructive research is to **undo an apparently pathological disjunction** [emphasis added] in 20<sup>th</sup> century social science and humanities research **which systematically elides the study of social processes which make the world a better place in favour of critique of processes which disempower and oppress** [emphasis added]. So instead of heartening accounts of progress we get discouraging analyses of oppression.”

Therefore, he sees Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) as the logical development away from focusing on negative aspects to focusing on positive development. He believes that CDA’s focus on power through deconstruction tends to highlight discrimination related to e.g. ethnicity, gender, social inequality, etc. He sees PDA as a complementary perspective (so not a rejection of CDA) with the purpose of making the world a better place – and exemplifies using the context of post-colonial Australians – Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous. Tom Bartlett (2010) supports this shift in focus from looking mainly at types of injustice to finding positive alternatives. Arguably, PDA could not exist without CDA as it is based on existing work on CDA. CDA focuses on e.g. hegemonic discourse and how power may be

misused to preserve power inequality. Bartlett's ethnographic studies in Guyana illustrate how power rendered through language is very much context dependent. In my work with Merkur, this context dependency has become very obvious to me. Things that I initially thought were important were replaced by issues that in this particular context were more relevant.

Although both Wodak (and Chilton) (2005) have emphasised that CDA is not necessarily concerned with negative aspects of discourse – e.g. the way we talk about and deal with issues such as gender and power inequality, political hegemony, etc. – it is in most cases easier to pinpoint negative aspect that can be improved, more so than positive aspects. Thus it highlights the negative aspects of discourse and practice. But that does not exclude the positive approach that James Martin (2004) tried to advocate. (since Martin and Rose called for an increased focus on Positive Discourse Analysis) (2003). Thus CDA and Positive Discourse Analysis cannot be considered to be dichotomies or two opposite ends of a continuum. The 'positive' does rather seem to comprise the approach to discourse analysis and not the subject being studied. Or it may even influence the study object, as the researcher will look for positive change, maybe at a slight risk of missing a critical issue. Even CDA is just a method to reach a more positive outcome.

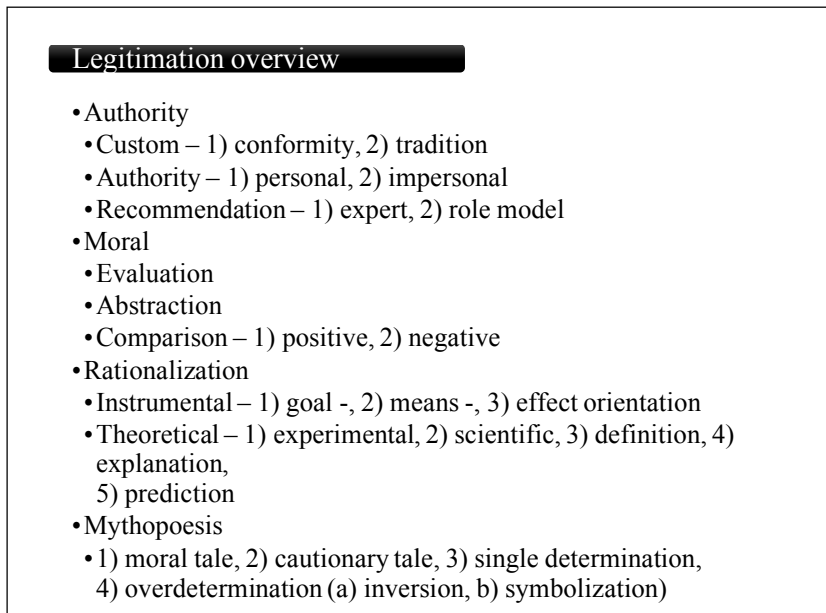
Despite the critical remarks related to CDA, I still see this framework as the most relevant framework for the present case study. The perspective (above) of Bluhm et al. – that the analyst should disclose his or her own perspectives and beliefs – is relevant. This analyst has no problem revealing that the particular institution being studied has an agenda of going against neo-liberalist thinking in its attempt to reduce power inequality and offer a more transparent and socially responsible business environment. Therefore, most theoretical as well as methodological criticism of CDA in general has very few practical implications on the study at hand. Blommaert's critique that CDA does not take into account all the things that are not said, is not relevant to this case, as focus is on both things being said and things deliberately not being said. However, Blommaert's remarks to the potential of CDA do seem relevant to this study, as it is limited in both geography and time. Going forward, I do believe that the CDA framework could work in relation to issues outside the First World as well as historically, depending on the additional theoretical framework applied. Widdowson's subjectivity claim I shall not try to dispute, I agree to some extent, believing that any analyst will be biased already prior to taking on any analysis task. Our research interests will be subjective and determined by our preunderstanding and context. Fairclough's dialectical relationship is relevant in this context as well. Jørgensen & Philips find it hard to distinguish: where does one step end and the next begin. This critique is understandable, but as all steps are relevant, it may not be important to make this sharp distinction. Finally, the critique relating to the negative aspects of CDA is interesting, but should most likely just be considered a supplement to CDA. Without CDA, this PDA reaction might not have arisen. So even though e.g. Merkur could focus on the positive accomplishments achieved, it is more interesting to focus on the tasks still ahead. However, this does not exclude any possibility of rejoicing in

what has been achieved so far. In fact, I believe that celebrating achievements so far will fuel further work with task that are not yet fully achieved. Thus the two strands could work in parallel.



## 6. THEORY: LEGITIMATION AND LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES

Articles 2 and 3 apply van Leeuwen's (2008) legitimation theory in combination with CDA, as an important aspect of negotiating and communicating CSR is legitimizing actions through discourse. Parts of van Leeuwen's discursive construction of legitimation seem to be applied by various stakeholders or actors. The construction of legitimation explains the transformations occurring in the process of recontextualizing (Fairclough 2014: 38-40). The social practices of the individual actors represented in the meetings between management, employees and customers are retold and thereby recontextualized in different communication situations. Van Leeuwen's approach to legitimation comprises four categories mentioned and subdivided below.



*Figure 6-1: Legitimation overview (summary from van Leeuwen, 2008)*

The variety of methods applied by the individual actors to establish legitimacy is an important part of CDA. Legitimation strategies may be defined as “specific, not always intentional or conscious, ways of employing different discourses or discursive resources to establish legitimacy” (Vaara et al. 2006: 794) or illegitimacy. Although legitimation strategies may be employed in either a predetermined or a

spontaneous way, they seem to be employed mainly spontaneously in the meetings that comprise the present data material.

In the data analysed, the main types of legitimation category and sub categories have been identified. However, the most efficient form of legitimation may be multiple legitimation, in which actors make use of and mix various legitimation strategies (Vaara and Tienari, 2008).

The categories may briefly be explained: ‘Authorization’ is legitimation by reference to a relevant authority – personal or impersonal – e.g. ‘Because I say so’ or in accordance with the law’. ‘Rationalization’ is legitimation by reference to a particularly widely accepted social practice or general belief within the particular social environment, for example – general assumptions in the banking sector. A more specific example may illustrate this. Leading up to the financial crisis, a general practice was for bank advisors to give advice on mortgaging a house, and the general assumption was that the financial advisor would know enough to provide good advice with no personal interests involved, when in fact it turned out that advisors were not impartial and might not have received any particular training preparing them to act in the role as advisor. (In a Danish context, use of the title ‘bank advisor’ requires both training and examination.) ‘Moral evaluation’ is legitimation by reference to values relevant to a particular social context. Here the above example might apply again, as it was generally assumed that bank advisor would always act morally responsible. The last classification is ‘mythopoesis’, which is legitimation obtained with the help of narrative, or by connecting the action in question to the past or future through storytelling.

Following legitimation theory, this study is particularly interested in ways in which practices gain the legitimated status by means of identifying precise legitimation strategies used by the actors to explain or excuse their demonstration of power in practices, where it has been generally acknowledged that power inequality should be kept at a minimum – as one way of demonstrating corporate social responsibility.



## 7. OVERVIEW OF ARTICLES

The three articles which together constitute the majority of this dissertation are briefly summarized to provide an overview in terms of what to expect. Together, they may help answer the overall research questions or at least point to an explanation as to why Merkur chooses to downtone CSR communication. Table 7-1 below provides a brief overview of objective, method and conclusion in relation to the individual articles.

	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
<b>Article 1</b> Employee stakeholders' role in ensuring alignment between employee and organizational branding	To explore how management and employees reach a common understanding of how to communicate the Merkur brand. The brand is almost synonymous with CSR and sustainability, and although Merkur refrains from communicating CSR, it is enacted e.g. in how Merkur is branded.	Qualitative Semi structured interview with management representative compared to focus group interview with all employees from one branch.	Alignment is present in the majority of the examples included. This alignment may be explained by employee engagement. As most employees express that they are proud to work for Merkur, as a stakeholder group they will strive to align with the management stakeholder group in communicating with other stakeholder groups.
<b>Article 2</b> The bank refused – legitimizing power subtly through discourse	To explore how employees succeed in turning down customer requests for credit while observing the bank's fundamental and ingrained CSR principle of power equality.	Qualitative Observing and analysing internal meetings where issues such as communication and power relations have been on the agenda as well as analysing email correspondence and a recorded meeting between employees and customers.	Employees negotiate values such as transparency and equality, and they try to limit power inequality so as to demonstrate equality in their conduct. The connection to CSR is not readily obvious, but Merkur assumes that customers will appreciate employees attempts to treat customers fairly regardless of any possibilities of demonstrating power, and as Merkur does not explicitly communicate CSR in text or talk, this is one way of enacting CSR.
<b>Article 3</b> CSR in deed and not in word – the social practice of CSR in a values based bank	To explore management's communication face-to-face with customers in order to establish whether limiting unequal power positions is possible in a sector dominated by the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse.	Qualitative Participation in the annual general meeting to take notes and observe attempts to tone down power inequality. Compared to previous definitions of how to limit displays of power established at internal meeting.	A hegemonic neo-liberal discourse influences rules of banking. Thus discursive struggles take place at the interactional level (Fairclough 2014: 58), but most often both management and customers are interested in toning down these struggles. Various types of legitimization help participants in conducting socially responsible behaviour thus enacting CSR rather than talking about it.

*Table 7-1: Overview of articles*

As the table illustrates, it was clear from the start of this project that Merkur does not wish to communicate CSR in text and talk, as CSR is the core of the business of lending money to other businesses, which act in a way such as to not harm anybody or anything. But in everything that Merkur does, it becomes obvious that CSR is a core value – not least in the way that Merkur brands itself. However, many businesses put quite an effort into aligning various internal stakeholders so as to speak with one voice towards external stakeholders. Internal meetings are an obvious opportunity to fine tune and align communication efforts, not least finding out what exactly these efforts should include when they are enacted rather than rendered in text and talk. This is illustrated article 1. The first article was published as a book chapter in an anthology (Cancino & Holmgreen 2014:175-202).

Once agreement has been reached on how to communicate with one voice (in this case voice is replaced with enactment), the hard work of actually doing so starts. At internal meetings, particularly power issues appeared to be the most relevant issue to work with. The inherent power which banks hold vis-a-vis customers need not be demonstratively enacted. Thus article 2 renders examples of efforts on the part of employees trying to limit power differences – in carefully explaining rules, regulations, terminology, etc. to customers. The second article was submitted to *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice* on 28 September 2016 (receipt confirmed 28 September 2016) and resubmitted with alterations on 4 September 2017 after a delayed review process..

Finally, article 3 focuses on management meeting customers at the annual general meeting. This can be considered a test of how successful alignment of communication has been, but also an opportunity for management to be face-to-face with customers. Also here it is relevant to investigate how power relations play out at the interactional level (Fairclough 2014: 58). Customers seem just as interested as management in keeping power inequalities at a minimum at the discursive level. Together, the three articles are meant to illustrate how CSR is interpreted and enacted from when it is conceptualized at management level till it is enacted through employees and received and responded to by customers. The third article was initially submitted to *Text & Talk* on 13 June 2016 (receipt confirmed 16 June 2016 and rejected on 31 July 2017) and later on submitted to *Hermes* on 31 October 2017.



## 8. BRIDGING THE ARTICLES – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter comprises an attempt to bridge the three articles and thus answer the overall questions which have already been addressed individually and through additional sub questions in each article:

The overall questions listed in chapter 1 were:

How does Merkur manage to align communication and enact CSR without communicating the concept in the conventional sense?

RQ1: How may Merkur align CSR communication among stakeholders, when Merkur actively tries to avoid conventional CSR communication?

RQ2: How is CSR communicated or enacted in Merkur?

RQ3: How is alignment ensured – if at all possible?

### **No CSR Communication?**

Prior to the initial data collection, it became evident that Merkur does not communicate CSR in the most conventional way – as most businesses and organizations seem to do – namely on the organizational website. However, graphical material rendered on the website had and has an ‘aura’ of CSR, and the business engagements listed on the website as well as the very obvious transparency are clear indicators that CSR is at the heart of the business.

Being a customer at Merkur, I already had a preunderstanding of the business and of its communication. And in connection with the on-start of the financial crisis in 2008, it was interesting to see how many businesses in the banking sector were quick to latch on the use of CSR communication as a lever to restore their image, which had been damaged somewhat by the crisis sparked by this particular sector.

### **Behaviour and alignment**

Merkur’s wish to limit CSR communication in the traditional sense became evident already in the first interview with a management representative. In fact, data suggests that management is aware of the mechanisms of self-promoter’s paradox – as their general belief is that communicating too much about CSR may cause consumers to question their motives and instead create scepticism (Ashforth & Gibbs 1990). This stance was clearly confirmed in the very first interview. However, Merkur does not wish to hide or avoid corporate responsibility or transparency, and therefore this responsibility has to be communicated in other ways – in the idea

behind the business and in interpersonal meetings (this is also highlighted in a very conscious focus on how individuals may influence each other's lives (Løgstrup 1997: 18) – the particular Løgstrup quote was debated at an internal meeting to spark a discussion on how to handle this responsibility in a respectful manner. Therefore, this way of acting responsibly becomes Merkur's interpretation of CSR, and it becomes very important that behaviour or in this case CSR behaviour is aligned – just as other alignment between stakeholder groups of other types of communication is important (Vallaster et al. 2012: 56).

### **Successful alignment?**

In the first article, alignment was tested pertaining to communicating the corporate brand. The stakeholder groups involved here were management and employees. Although alignment and speaking with one voice is important and although alignment is present in most examples, the way that this alignment is expressed is still unique. This can be explained by the fact that Merkur provides no scripts to follow in communicating with e.g. customers. Therefore, the employees' individuality is in no way suppressed. However, alignment is still present most likely because of the effort and amount of time put into reaching a common understanding of things e.g. through internal meetings – in this case the corporate brand. Most employees are interested in reaching this common understanding and are quite aware of the importance of the brand. This could also be explained by the employees' pride in working for Merkur.

An external factor contributing to the pride in working for this business and brand is the somewhat lower salaries compared to the sector average. The sector as such has been known to pay fairly well (Meunier 2007) at least leading up to the onset of the financial crisis. So employees choosing Merkur over competitors may be considered to be more interested in the cause than in remuneration. This explanation may be chattered a bit by the crisis, after which potential employees may have applied because they were out of a job rather than for idealistic reasons. But in general, employees working for Merkur seem to fit the matrix definition of stakeowners offered by Crane & Ruebottom (2012) – conceptualized on the basis of social identity. The Merkur employee stakeowners have in most cases actively sought out this particular organization to work for based on e.g. their personal values.

Regardless, individual communication and particularly alignment is very difficult to control, and respect for individuality and diversity is also important to Merkur. Therefore, a very high level of trust seems to replace the use of scripts to guide conversation with customers, and as such the next logical step to take is to evaluate the employee-customer meeting as described in article two.

Power issues are relevant in the relationship between management and employees. As mentioned above, no scripts are used, no strict rules dictate behaviour and the individual should be respected. However, there will inevitably be situations in which

power is unequally distributed, as described below, power differences are sometimes necessary, but can be appeased. One way of focusing on mitigating these power differences is through the use of legitimations strategies in discourse.

Legitimation strategies used by employees at the internal meetings – management-employee communication – and at the focus group interview seem to fall into mainly two categories namely authorization and moral evaluation (van Leeuwen 2008), although other categories are present such as rationalization and mythopoesis. Quite interestingly, one type of authority is not very strong in Merkur, namely authority of conformity. Conformity is explained as follow – the reason “why” things are done a certain way is “because that’s what most people do” or “most people are doing it, and so should you” (van Leeuwen, 2008, 109) – in Merkur the answer would more likely be “but why should we”, thus more often than not questioning conformity.

### **Communicating CSR in less conventional ways**

Moving on to the second article focusing on CSR communication between employees and customers it has now been established through the first article that alignment may be hard considering the wish to respect individuality, but that employees seem quite determined and also quite committed to the cause of communicating with one voice. The second article now focuses on what to communicate so as to demonstrate CSR rather than communicating in text and talk.

Through the data material that in this case comprises cultural meetings negotiating how to render responsible conduct and actual customer meetings – physical and email correspondence – alignment can still be tested, but more importantly it is interesting to see whether the idea of limiting unequal power differences, which was the most prominent issue, can be implemented in customer meetings. It has thus been established that CSR communication constitutes this limitation of power inequality. Therefore, the following is one of the guiding questions in this article:

How do employees succeed in turning down customer requests for credit while observing the bank’s fundamental and ingrained CSR principle of power equality?

Transparency, equality and the wish to limit power inequality quickly appear as valid substitutes for traditional CSR communication. Employees negotiate ways to demonstrate these values in their conduct. Particularly the unequal distribution of power is interesting to dwell at, as the uneven distribution is a two-way inequality. Customers are free to do as they please with their money – e.g. take them elsewhere, but employees have to accommodate customers as far as possible in line with Merkur values and in doing so limiting their power demonstrations.

However, there are situations in which demonstration of power becomes necessary – e.g. in the case of unauthorized overdrafts. Still, demonstrating limited power

inequality is important, but also challenging. This attempt at limiting power inequality may not be unique to this sector or rather this particular type of subcategory – sustainable banks. But the effort that goes into preparing employees for the customer meetings is quite substantial and differs from the typical use of scripts in the service sector (Victorino et al. 2012).

The focus on enacting CSR rather than communicating CSR does not mean that employees are not aware of the terminology. The terms CSR and sustainability appear in the transcripts, but the effort and energy put into not using the terminology – particularly pertaining to CSR – is not in vain. Employees seem very conscious of not using the terminology – at least in the data collected for this study. By use of transparency and expert legitimation, the employees succeed in not tipping the power balance. One typical example of expert legitimation appears when – instead of just telling a customer why he cannot make unauthorised overdrafts, the employee carefully explains the relevant rules and regulations, which the entire sector has to abide by regardless of ideological stance.

So, once again legitimation is used to detect how employees go about limiting unequal power on their own part. Particularly authority and expert legitimation is employed, but also contextual factors such as rules and regulations demonstrate impersonal legitimation. This impersonal legitimation is interesting as it may also be considered to be the type of context that Fairclough refers to in his model above.

However, the immediately traceable reaction is still worth noticing. One customer experiences some justified power inequality and accepts it, as it is explained to him. Another customer seems to feel safe and relaxed in this respectful environment and therefore he gives up the struggle of applying the right banking terminology and rests assured that he is given good advice all the same.

The awareness of power issues in itself seems to limit unequal power demonstration. However, the reasons for toning power up and down are numerous and very different, thus in some cases making it acceptable and even necessary to demonstrate power inequality – e.g. when customers are not following the rules. Even though this is not a comparative study, the way that Merkur prioritises negotiating a common understanding of how to express responsible behaviour may inspire other organizations too.

The deliberate suppression of power inequalities works at several levels. It is not just a struggle between various stakeholder groups. The larger struggle is with the dominant or hegemonic neo-liberal discourse which has been dominant in the banking sector as well as many other sectors. It is debatable whether or not the financial crisis may not have influenced this. The neo-liberal discourse is still dominant, but there may be another discourse alongside and maybe even growing. It is too soon to say whether a discourse of sustainability will eventually become dominant, but this will be an interesting issue to pursue in future research projects.



## Customer reactions to communication

Finally, in the third article the interaction between management and customers is investigated at the AGM – and the circle of potential stakeholders outlined initially is fully investigated – however with limited data. The preunderstanding from the two previous articles can be condensed to the following: Merkur does not wish to articulate CSR, but rather enact it; there is fairly good alignment between the way that management and employees understand this enactment – even if management respects individuality and does not provide scripts as to how to talk and act; rather quite a lot of time goes into reaching a common understanding of organizational values and how to enact these. But the link between management and customers has not yet been investigated as it can be investigated here at the interactional level (Fairclough 2014: 58). It may be relevant to mention here that customers – just as employees – may seek out Merkur because of its sustainability profile. (In general, Merkur business customers, which are subject to quite strict requirements, are more satisfied and loyal than the average business banking customer representing the entire sector (Finanssektorens Kundebenchmark 2014).) In those cases, both employees and customers may be more likely to seek common ground based on common values rather than conflict. On the other hand, as it becomes evident from the data, customers are not afraid to question the ways in which things are done.

At the AGM (Annual General Meeting) two obstacles in the CSR discourse become clear – one is the power relation discourse and the other is the general enactment of CSR rather than communicating it. Customer types within Merkur may vary, and some customers will expect more CSR communication. However, at the AGM this customer type is likely to be underrepresented, as only customers who hold a small share of a business will be able to participate in AGMs, and typically the shareholders will be the customers who take a greater interest in a business. In conventional banking, the hegemonic profit oriented discourse is to be expected, but the profit maximization paradigm, which is also part of the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, is not taken for granted in Merkur. Some customers choose to let Merkur keep their interest and invest it, thereby missing out on potential profit all for a good cause. The two stakeholder groups – management and customers – seem to try to help each other avoid the hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism – by e.g. not focusing on profit maximisation, by not using conventional CSR discourse to promote Merkur – and this endeavour may be challenging particularly following the financial crisis which seemed to spark an interest in using CSR as a lever to improve an otherwise tarnished sector reputation. In other words, the discursive struggle worth paying attention to here is between the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse, which is typical for the conventional part of the banking sector and naturalized in the banking lingo (at least up until the onset of the financial crisis), and a new sustainability discourse focusing much more on ethics.

Therefore, the deliberate suppression of power inequalities works at several levels. It is not just a struggle between various stakeholder groups. The larger struggle is with the dominant or hegemonic neo-liberal discourse which has been dominant in the

banking sector as well as many other sectors. It is debatable whether or not the financial crisis may not have influenced this. The neo-liberal discourse is still dominant, but there may be another discourse alongside and maybe even growing. It is too soon to say whether a discourse of sustainability will eventually become dominant, but this will be an interesting issue to pursue in future research projects.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The overall questions were listed in chapter 1 and will be addressed separately:

RQ1: How may Merkur align CSR communication among stakeholders, when Merkur actively tries to avoid conventional CSR communication?

By actively and in cooperation with employees identifying ways of enacting CSR rather than conventionally communicating, Merkur seems to be fairly successful in aligning CSR enactment and at the same time respect individuality and not forcing particular ways of speaking or acting upon employees – as one of the stakeholder groups. As for customers, the mere fact that they are generally more loyal than the average customer, that they generally seem to seek out Merkur because of its values probably says as much as the encounter at the AGM. Merkur seems to go against the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse as do many of its customers. This becomes obvious in the way that the general tendency to latch onto the CSR lever is actively avoided.

RQ2: How is CSR communicated or enacted in Merkur?

CSR is not actively communicated in text or talk, but merely enacted. However, the product portfolio and the graphics used on the website can arguably be considered types of CSR communication. Furthermore, Merkur seems to have great respect for Half-Truths in which CSR may be misused to provide self-laudatory statements attempting to sway public perception. It can be used to hide less positive information which may, however, ultimately be revealed and backfire harming the organization's credibility and trustworthiness. In the case of Merkur, finding hidden CSR info could only backfire positively – and that may apply to other businesses too! Self-promotor's paradox (Ashforth & Gibbs 1990) is another explanation for avoiding conventional CSR communication and instead enacting CSR, and as the organization is founded on a desire to finance sustainable businesses enactment may seem more trustworthy without the communication about it added.

RQ3: How is alignment ensured – if at all possible?

Part of this question has already been answered above. Therefore, only the latter part of the question will be addressed here – namely whether or not alignment is possible. It is possible in the case at hand, because all the stakeholders investigated seem to share the same values to some degree and have the same interest in treating each other with mutual respect. Traditionally and in many service industries the use of scripts serves the purpose of aligning communication – sometimes to a degree that may seem tiring to e.g. customers. But as this is not a case of traditional communication but rather enactment, scripts make less sense. Rather management appeals to e.g. employees through allowing time for meetings to e.g. delve into philosophy on how to treat others with respect using e.g. philosopher Løgstrup's

(1997) notion on how we always influence the people that we interact with. This time for reflection may be well spent in reaching common ground.

Concluding on the questions asked initially, in the respective articles and through the hermeneutic process of learning more about the business and in more detail as described under bridging the articles, the final paragraph identifies overall findings and future research interests in a field where not much attention has been given to CSR enactment rather than communication.

### **Defeating hegemonic neo-liberal discourse**

All three stakeholder groups referred to in figure 1 actively try to abandon the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse in favour of a new discourse of responsibility or sustainability. This discourse would be interesting to pursue further, as it may not be limited to just this one sector, but to other sectors as well. In addition, other sectors may benefit from the experience with going against the hegemonic discourse. This general interest among Merkur stakeholders in enacting CSR is supported by the CSR literature in that there should be accordance between what business say that they do, and what they actually do. Furthermore, CSR literature also suggest refraining from self-promotion (Ashforth & Gibbs 1990), which Merkur seems to perfect. However, all stakeholders are challenged in the enactment of CSR, as the hegemonic discourses characterizing conventional banking systems challenge this noble aim of avoiding the hegemonic neo-liberal discourse. A fourth stakeholder type, which has not been identified in figure 1, is the systems within which the entire sector has to operate – both conventional and non-conventional banks - and the legal requirements that likewise apply to the sector as such. This fourth stakeholder may have to be given greater consideration as it is a stakeholder, which cannot be ignored, and ultimately trying to alter the hegemonic discourse may also influence the context which this fourth stakeholder makes up. Thus both management and employees are somewhat bound by the naturalized institutional discourse that characterizes the banking sector. In addition, the struggle between discourses of neo-liberalism and sustainability are likely to be relevant to basically any sector and should be monitored closely in future research.

### **Future related research**

Customer response to the limited power demonstration is not part of this study. It would be interesting to look into customers' perception of this, but challenging to come up with the right questions without revealing too much information and thus not get the more immediate response. In the long run, however, customers will likely appreciate attempts from employees to treat them fairly – also discursively.

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